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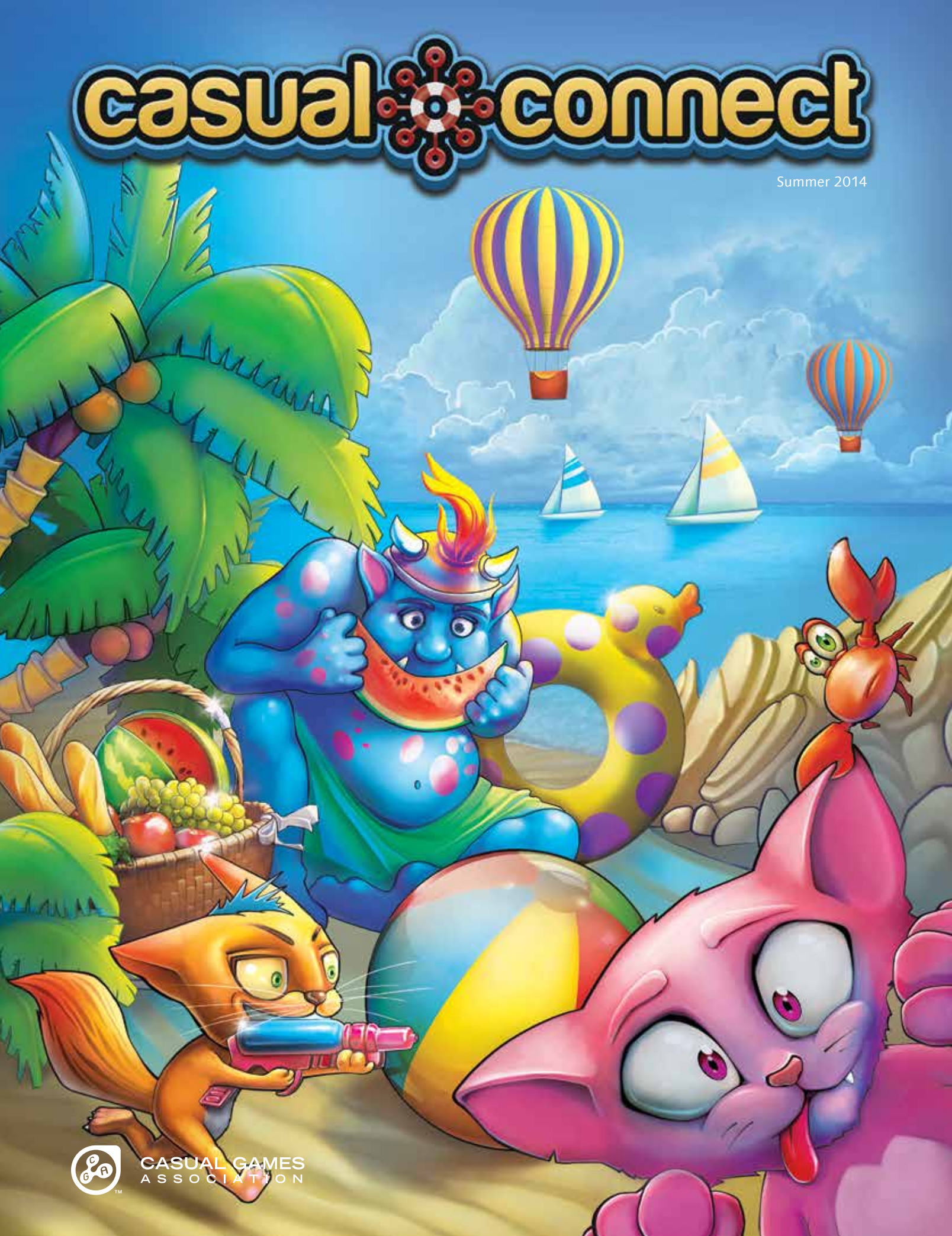

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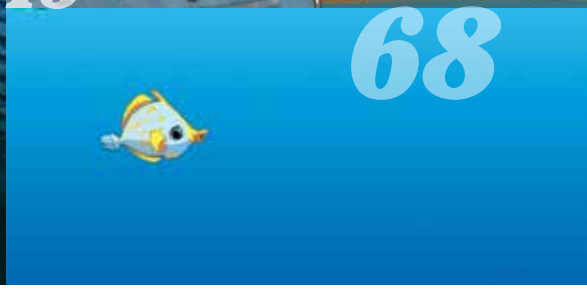

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Letter from the Director

Sometimes I think it would be nice to have a crystal ball to see into the future. Which platform should we cover? What will be the next great innovation in game-play? Which markets will see the most growth? Will I actually remember my husband's birthday this year?

Stare all we want into the future, though—we're not likely to see much. Perhaps that's why it is so tempting to look into the past instead—and why we end up with so many clones and so few truly innovative new games. We see it all too often. We fixate on the hits of yesterday and get so busy creating copycats that we fail to notice when the next big thing rushes by.

Would a crystal ball fix that problem? I don't think so.

Everyone has the potential to build the next great game. Focus on understanding how consumers are actually interacting with technology. Pour more energy into research, experimentation and building a team of superstars. Then follow your passion and build the kind of game that your team of superstars deserves to work on. If you dare to build *that* game—the one you *really* want to build—focusing on the current needs of the market rather than on the past or the distant future, you will create something wonderfully unexpected. And if what you end up with truly is unexpected, guess what? You will have caught your first glimpse of the future.

So there you have it: a crystal ball that actually works. How awesome is that?

Jessica

Jessica Tams, *Director of the Casual Games Association*
jessica@casualconnect.org

EVENT CALENDAR

22-24 July 2014
Casual Connect USA in San Francisco

Hilton San Francisco
Union Square
333 O'Farrell St.,
San Francisco, CA 94102

10-12 November 2014
Casual Connect Eastern Europe in Belgrade

CROWNE PLAZA
BELGRADE
Vladimira Popovica
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Belgrade, 11070, Serbia

4-6 February 2015
Casual Connect Europe in Amsterdam

BEURS VAN BERLAGE
Damrak 243
1012 ZJ, Amsterdam,
Netherlands

May 2015
Casual Connect Asia

Shangri-La Hotel
22 Orange Grove Road
258350, Singapore

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San Francisco, CA

Casual Connect SF
San Francisco
July 2014

PlayNext
Santa Clara, CA

Imangi Studios
Raleigh, NC

deltaDNA
Edinburgh, UK

ustwo
London, UK

Nyamyam
Staffordshire, UK

Casual Connect Europe
Amsterdam
February 2015

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Before making games, Ian was a writer for The Onion and Spaceballs: The Animated Series. Following some work as a game designer at TellTale Games, Dallas became an MFA student and started development of *The Unfinished Swan*.
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Jennifer co-founded Nyamyam in 2010 together with Phil Tossel. Previously, Jennifer was making games at Acquire in Japan and at Rare in the UK.

Staffordshire, UK

Melesta Games
Minsk, Belarus

ERS-G Studio
Kyiv, Ukraine

Casual Connect Belgrade
Belgrade
November 2014

Casual Connect Asia
Singapore
May 2015

Angelina Chernyak & Natalia Perevala

Artists Angelina Chernyak and Natalia Perevala have worked in the casual games industry for many years. They have created graphical worlds of mystery and beauty for many of ERS Game Studio's famous casual projects. For this cover they wanted to depict something funny and cool. In showing an atmosphere of summer lightheartedness and relaxation in San Francisco, they have also captured the unlimited horizon of the in-game world.

ustwo
London, UK

A Game of Architecture and Feeling

A Journey into *Monument Valley*

Every project is different, but what stays the same is that our job as creators is to tell stories, to create amazing things. No matter what platform I'm creating for, I'm always thinking of how to use art and other tools to create a connection with the player. Case in point: *Monument Valley*, a multi-level puzzle game of fantastical architecture and unique art that our studio, ustwo, released in April, 2014.

Project Diversity and the Pursuit of Fun

Since its founding in 2004, ustwo has created products for Google, the Nook, Sony, HTC, and numerous other companies. The studio began to expand into game production in 2013 when we released *Blip Blup,* a puzzle game, and *Whale Tail,* a side-scroller in which the player helps a flying whale collect bubbles and meet other challenges.

Trying new things is part of ustwo's DNA. Part of the company's culture is to just do things because they're fun and awesome—and because they give us a chance to learn something. We see investment in terms of people and culture rather than just money. We think having a variety of talent and projects under our roof is healthy.

Game-related or not, a project is a chance to gain a better understanding of our creative potential.

You might even say that each project is a learning experience on multiple fronts simultaneously—how to work as a team, how to position products in a crowded marketplace, how to cultivate an audience, how to create good user experiences. Game-related or not, a project is a chance to gain a better understanding of our creative potential.

ustwo's culture is also influenced by the fact that we recruit coders who understand art and artists who understand programming. That cross-disciplinary perspective creates an environment that helps the design process move smoothly because it allows the developers to make better decisions along the way. *Monument Valley* in particular is a game about mathematical concepts, aesthetic experiences, and how they meet. On a daily basis we would have to approach designing levels and designing illusions by considering both the technical and artistic sides of a problem.

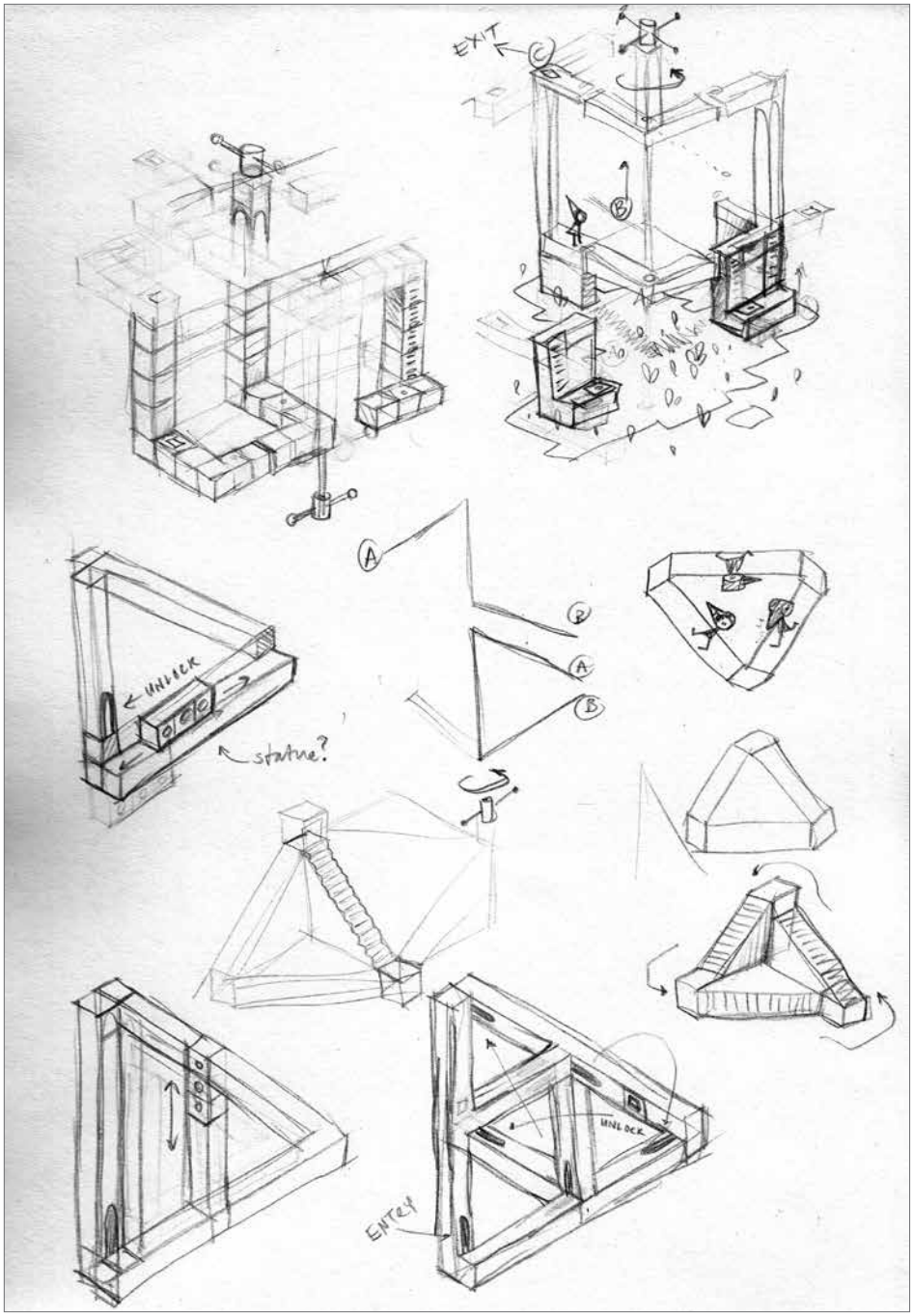
Organic Development

The development for *Monument Valley* started in the beginning of 2013 while our team was pitching ideas back and forth to one another. One idea I'd always been passionate about was making a game where architecture played a central role—and the concept grew from there.

For inspiration, we drew upon a variety of sources: M.C. Escher, Japanese prints, architecture from around the world, flower arrangements, poster design, low poly 3D art… the list goes on. That is in part a reflection of my own design philosophy. I believe that one of the keys to creating a rich experience is to build upon the work of others.

ustwo team at their office in London

A Journey into *Monument Valley*



For inspiration, we drew upon a variety of sources: M.C. Escher, Japanese prints, architecture from around the world, flower arrangements, poster design, low poly 3D art… the list goes on.

A substantial part of *Monument Valley's* success comes from how players engage with the game emotionally. That sort of deep engagement wasn't something the team necessarily planned for. We just wanted people to engage with the game. There's actually very little emotional "content" in the game. We don't use music or animation or art to tell the player what to feel. The player is allowed to empathize (or not) based on the situations we present. Allowing players to do this themselves can be more powerful than trying to force it upon them.

So where does the name come from? You might be surprised. After considering many alternatives, eventually we decided the name didn't need to be descriptive but could be more like an album title. We thought *Monument Valley* had a grand, mysterious, poetic sound to it. And that was that.

The Silent Princess

To navigate through twisted levels inspired by Escher and other surreal artists, players control a silent princess named Ida. For many games, character is more important than narrative. But in *Monument Valley,* the key was

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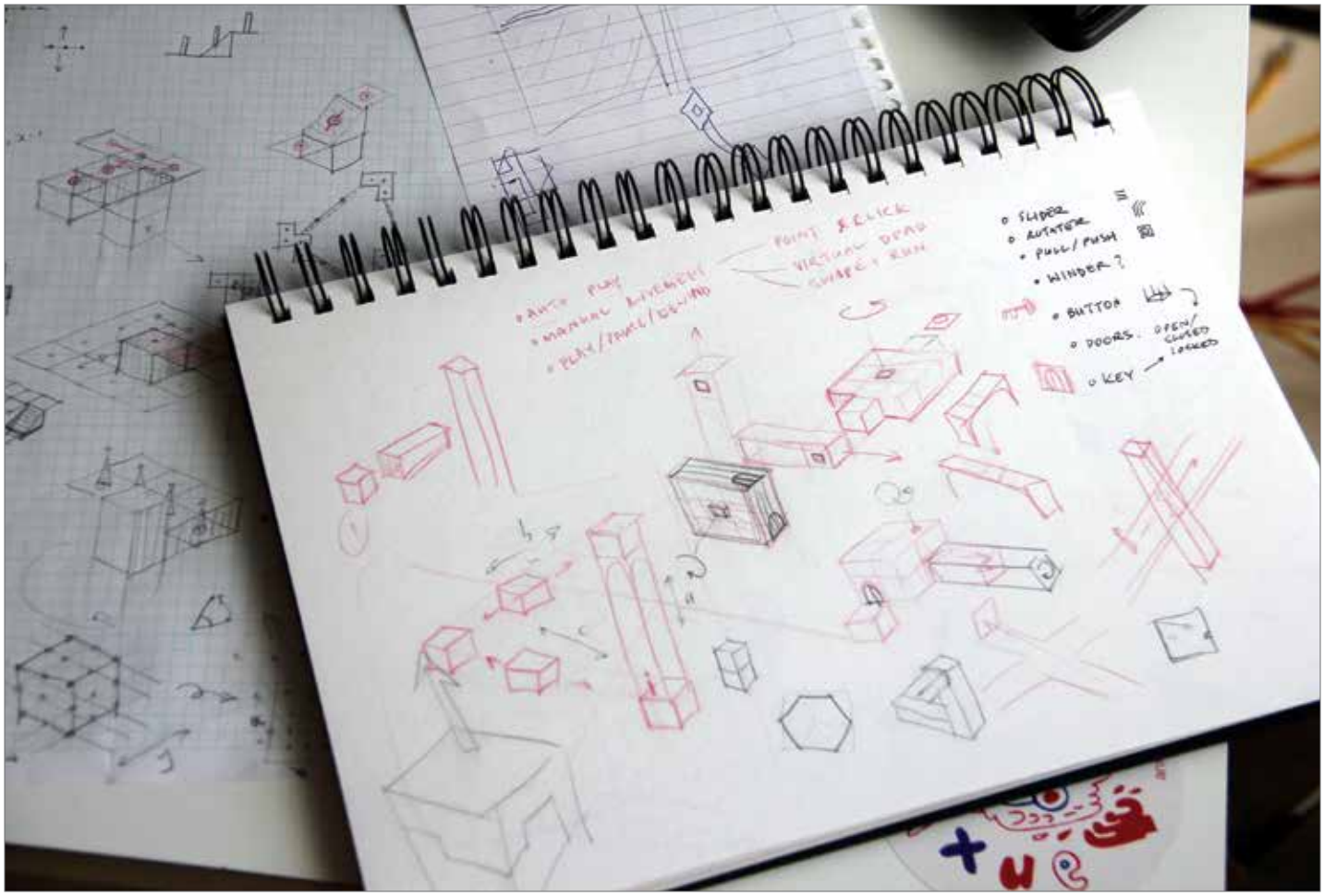
A Journey into *Monument Valley*



enabling players to inhabit the game rather than watch the events simply play out before them. We knew from the beginning that Ida would not have a face or a voice—to allow players to put themselves in her shoes.

In addition to finding her way through these worlds, Ida also has to deal with crows that developed later as antagonists since cranky birds just suited their behavior. As with so many other details within *Monument Valley,* these elements also emerged organically. Only towards the end of the project did we figure out the relationship between Ida, the crows and the architecture—and that's how the story worked itself out.

Future Aspirations

An important aspect of ustwo is that we doesn't look at *Monument Valley* as just another intellectual property that should be milked for as much merchandising as possible.

Monument Valley is a game about mathematical concepts, aesthetic experiences, and how they meet.

We are in the very fortunate position to not be forced to exploit the game in ways that feel unnatural to the product. Consequently, we're planning on producing only museum-quality prints and a soundtrack. We're looking at other possibilities, but we also don't want to lose focus of what we're here to do—make great games. ❊

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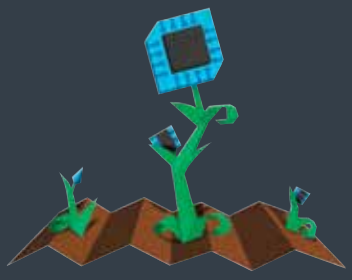

INDEPENDENT TECHNOLOGY

ALL PLATFORMS

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Infographic

Retention Case Study: Social Casino

- ***Developer:*** **Playspace**
- ***Games:*** **Parchis, Bingo, Slots**
- ***Subscribers:*** **8 million**

playspace

deltaDNA CHANGE THE GAME

> **Free coins each day to play at least one game**

> **Players unlock new features as they level up**

> **Soft currency (coins) to bet, play mini slots and purchase items**

> **Hard currency (credits) to customize experience, gift other players**

Player behaviors identified through segmentation

Staying Alive

Low balance, low win rate but persistent players

Focused Competitors

High wins rates and lots of game play but not social

Fast Track VIPs

High momentum, engaged, spenders who are likely to become whales

Connected Accelerators

Highly sociable, good win rates but more interested in chat

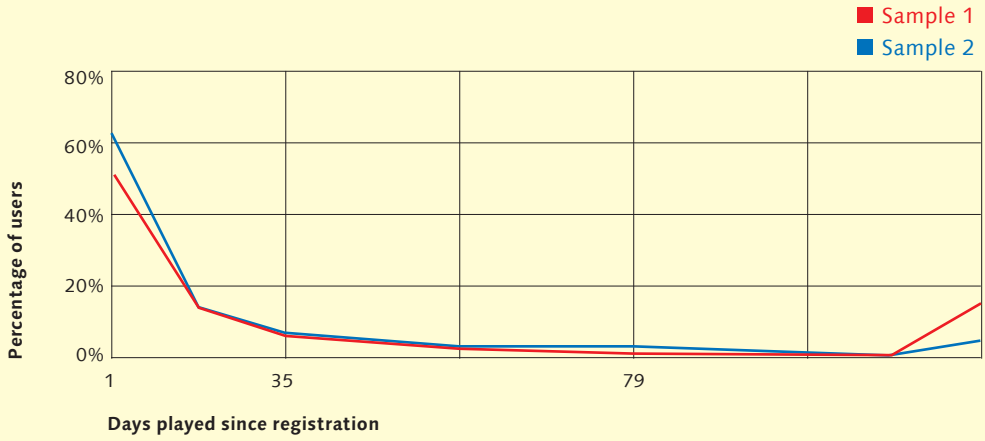
Results

	Staying Alive	Focused Competitors	Fast Track VIPs	Connected Accelerators
Win Rate	LOW	MEDIUM HIGH	MEDIUM HIGH	HIGH
Games Started	Medium Low	MEDIUM HIGH	MEDIUM HIGH	Medium Low
Balance at 1st Payment	Medium Low	Medium Low	Medium Low	HIGH
Friends Connected	Medium High	Medium	Medium High	HIGH
FB Post Shares	LOW	LOW	HIGH	Low
Level	Medium Low	MEDIUM HIGH	MEDIUM HIGH	Medium Low
Avg. Payments	2	9	16	2

NEW USER DISTRIBUTION	BEFORE	AFTER
Engaged users	4%	14%
1-day users	62%	52%

Inflation problems from gifting were also addressed by this increase in spending

RETENTION RATE



350%
Increase in engaged users *(playing for more than 10 days in a row)*

20%
Improvement in players returning

6×
Growth of the item sales in the in-game store

8×
Increase in transaction value

5×
Increase in number of transactions

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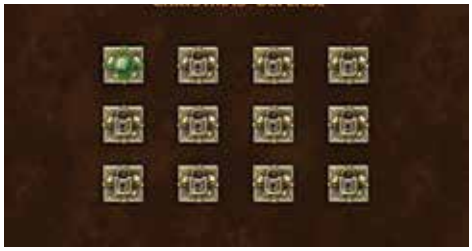
Melesta
Minsk, Belarus

From the Toy Box to the War Room

A *Toy Defense* Postmortem



Located in Minsk, the capital city of Belarus, Melesta was founded in 2008 with the goal of creating PC and tablet games—focusing primarily casual games for women. After years of making games like *Dream Farm, Green City,* and *Jo's Dream: Organic Coffee,* Melesta wanted to expand its audience and create a game in the tower defense genre—a game which eventually became *Toy Defense.* When it was released in 2012, *Toy Defense* was so well received that Melesta immediately went to work producing sequels, including *Toy Defense 2, Toy Defense 3: Fantasy,* and *Toy Defense 4: Sci-Fi.*

Origins

When Melesta decided to try to expand beyond its core female audience, it recognized that it would have to start building entirely different games, with strategy, fighting, and competition elements replacing the arcade and time-management features it had always specialized in. It was a fundamental shift for the company that required a whole new approach to game design and marketing.

One spark of inspiration was a desire to appeal to the childhood memories of playing with toy soldiers. Melesta's development team wanted those who played *Toy Defense* to feel a sense of nostalgia combined with strategic game-play similar to military games. According to product manager Aleksandra Drebezova, the studio wanted to evoke "the most epic and decisive operations of the history, including Stalingrad, Normandy, and the Crusades."

Toy Defense

Of course, creating nostalgia while referencing epic, historical battles is not easy. The key is to keep as much familiar as possible. "Everyone knows from childhood how to arrange soldiers so that the enemy cannot pass," says Drebezova. "We also tried to make the interface simple and intuitive so that a newcomer would know how to place and command his army even when he is just on the Main Menu screen."

As newcomers to the genre, the Melesta team ran into a unique challenge: Initially they became so good at tower defense games that they almost made the game too hard for the average player. When they realized that they could complete any level with ease on the first try, they failed to take into account how difficult the game might be for first-time players. "When we conducted player testing, we realized that the game we'd created was almost impossible to complete," said Drebezova.

Expansion

Once the first *Toy Defense* was released, Melesta had access to a plethora of data about their consumers. For instance, while the game showed thousands of downloads from the moment it became available, the big surge in downloads for *Toy Defense* did not come for several months. "In retrospect, we understand that Spring was not the best season to launch *Toy Defense,*" Drebezova says. "Over three-million unique users joined our [game] in autumn."

Other data revealed that the majority of *Toy Defense* users primarily play the game on iPads. Drebezova believes that the reason for this is that Melesta didn't have enough experience adapting their games to work on devices with small screens. Consequently, the team is now careful to make their games suitable for a variety of mobile devices.

As for the usability of *Toy Defense,* Melesta may have overcompensated a bit when it adjusted down the difficulty of game-play. After the launch, Melesta found that some users were now able to beat the entire game in just two weeks—so the team knew it needed to

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Toy Defense

look for ways to expand the game with new features, new worlds and new missions. And of course they also decided to expand the game by creating sequels for players to enjoy.

While creating a sequel to a popular game seems like an obvious direction for any studio, Melesta wanted to do more than just recycle the first installment. So the team sought to highlight users' favorite features and combine them with innovative additions. In addition, Melesta studied other popular genres and examined the story-lines of popular games and movies of the time. As the various sequels started to catch on, they generated user data of their own, revealing new insights for the team to draw upon. For instance, says Drebezova, "we noticed some geographical differences between *Toy Defense 3: Fantasy* and *Toy Defense 4: Sci-Fi,* Our Asian players liked the cosmic world of sci-fi in *Toy Defense 4* while Western users preferred the medieval world of goblins and dragons of *Toy Defense 3."*

Evolution

As you might guess, there are still other sequels in the works. One is tentatively called *Toy Defense: Zombies,* and another will be titled *Toy Offence. Offence* will be a change from the standard game-play by being an RPG. According to Drebezova, *Offence* will allow players the "opportunity not only to command and fight off numerous enemies and defend their bases, but to wage war in the first person, to compete with other gamers, and complete challenging missions while leading their armies to victory."

Additionally, Melesta is also in the process of developing *Toy Battleships.* While this game will not be presented as an installment in the *Toy Defense* franchise, Drebezova says that the central idea—reconstructed, legendary battles of WWI and WWII—will be very close to *Toy Defense.*" Specifically, says Drebezova, *Toy Battleships* will be an RPG that allows players to command a battleship and participate in "the most decisive, historically-accurate navy battles and unite with other captains to form a mighty flotilla." ❊

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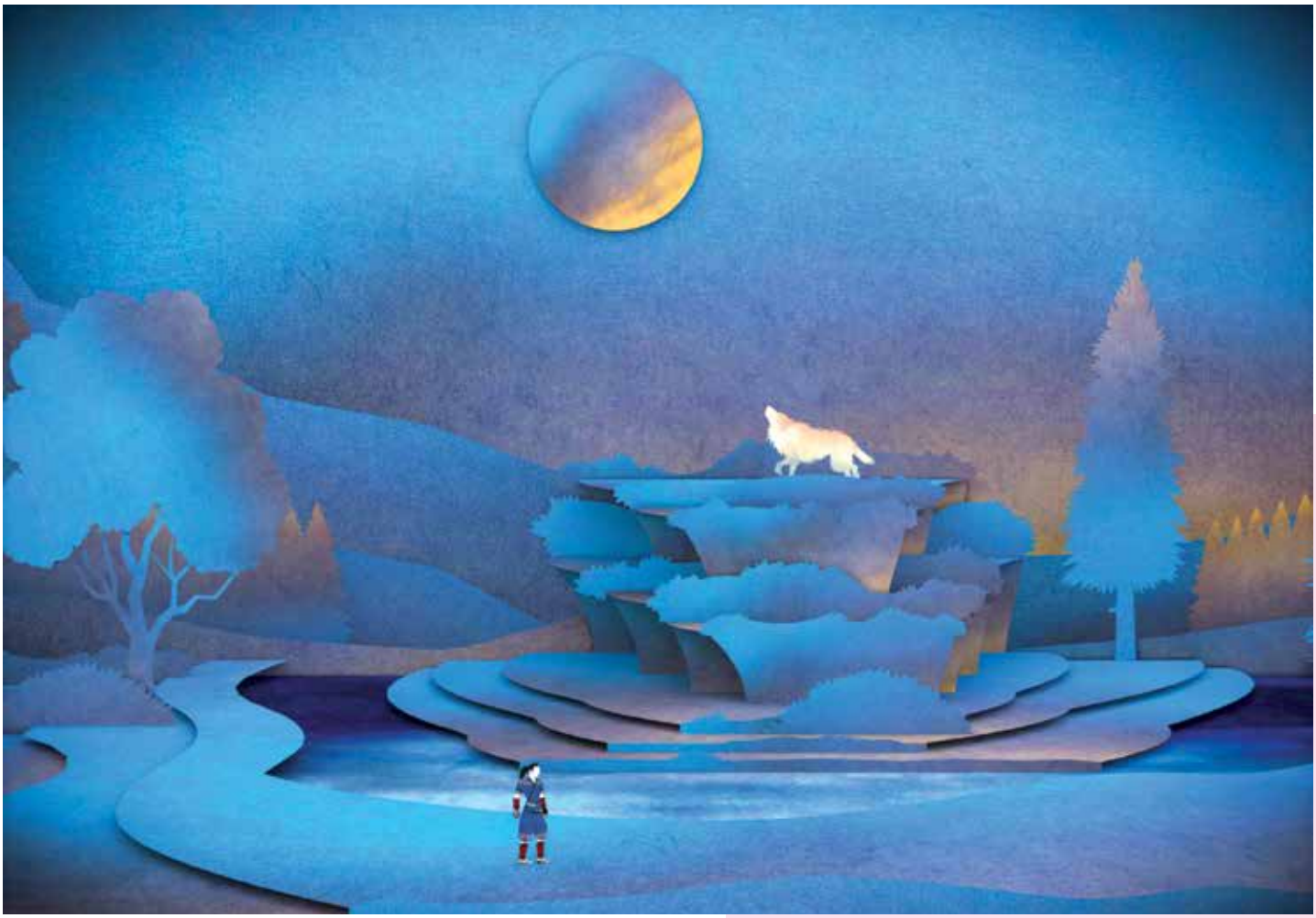
A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Tengami

DEVELOPER
Nyamyam
GENRE
Adventure
PLATFORM
iOS
RELEASE DATE
February 20, 2014

Tengami is an atmospheric adventure game in which players solve puzzles and obstacles by flipping, folding, sliding, and pulling parts of each level as if they were interacting with a page in a pop-up book. We wanted *Tengami* to be a very quiet and calm game, almost Zen-like—which is why we gave it that name. In Japanese, "Ten" stands for heaven and "Gami" for paper. Thus *tengami* means "heavenly paper."



Origin and Development

When you turn a page in a pop-up book, it gives you such a sense of wonder. Our team wanted to capture that experience by using the origami and folding nature of pop-ups as a game mechanic. We were motivated by two key questions: *What kind of video games can you make with pop-up books? And does it even make sense?*

Initially, we intended for *Tengami* to be a faster-paced game starring a very acrobatic ninja. But we quickly realized that, while those ideas might have been fun, they didn't utilize the pop-ups very well. A fast-paced game would pressure players to approach each level with the goal of speeding through it. But we wanted people to play with the pop-ups at their own pace and enjoy the tactility of opening and closing the intricate pop-structures. So in the end we made a completely different game: very slow-placed, contemplative and with a strong focus on manipulating the pop-up book.

Tengami

Character Development

In addition to being able to run fast and jump high, the original, ninja character of *Tengami* could attach to pop-ups in order to make them fold. But once we realized that type of character wouldn't fit with the way the game was evolving, we replaced it with an unnamed hero. To integrate this character into the slower-paced game, we focused on creating a back-story and figuring out what the hero's emotional arc would be. Given that *Tengami* does not have a very explicit story, it was important to know the character's motivation for going on this journey.

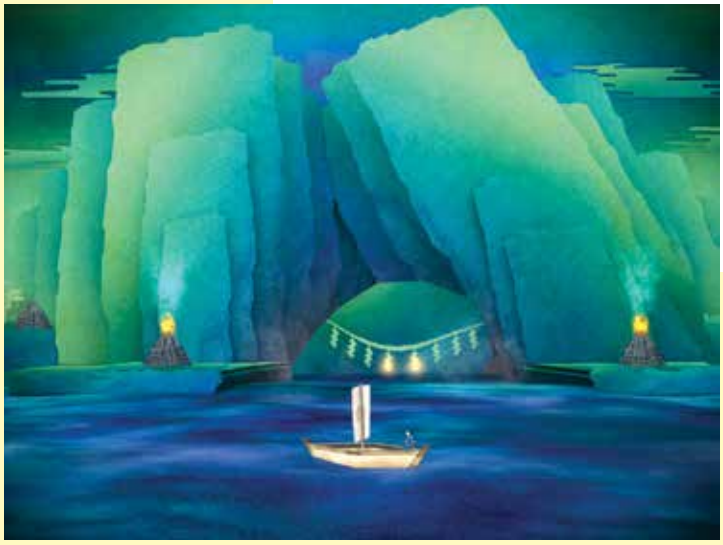
Touch and Feel

We wanted *Tengami's* game mechanics to be so intuitive that any player who knows how to read a pop-up book would also know how to manipulate *Tengami's* world. To accomplish this goal, we designed the game to communicate to players *where* they would have to touch. The team used a subtly glowing ring to show the position and size of the touch regions. We deliberately kept it unobtrusive so as to not take away from the beauty of the world—and so that it wouldn't make players feel pressured to get through *Tengami* quickly.

As *Tengami's* visual style evolved, we sought inspiration from cultures with an interesting history of paper. Japan was very high on our list because they have a long history of hand producing high-quality papers for various uses. It was while studying Japanese paper art that the team learned of and fell in love with a counterpart to the standard origami paper that has no printed patterns and uses more subdued and natural colors. That discovery ultimately led to a very minimalistic look that is at the same time striking and calming.

We also had to immerse ourselves in the pop-up book experience so that we could adequately mimic the paper-folding that makes those books so engaging. As you might guess, we had to go back to the basics with just paper, scissors, and glue, learning first to make actual pop-ups before we could make virtual ones. Eventually, one of our designers, Phil Tossell, was able to create a set of plugins for MODO that allowed us to build authentically-folding 3D pop-ups.

Tengami



Lessons Learned

A lot of time went into educating ourselves to become pop-up artists who were also creating amazing technology. It was time well-spent, because not only did we create *Tengami,* but we now have new tools that we can deploy for future projects.

Beyond those specific technical skills, the team also learned how to better shape a project's goals to fit our abilities. The whole concept—a game inside an authentically folding pop-up book—was perhaps a little too ambitious for a three-person, self-funded team. We all had to go beyond our limits to ship the game, and it was exhausting. We have no regrets, of course, but next time we may choose a project with a more manageable scope.

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Indie Corner

An Interview with Ian Dallas about *The Unfinished Swan*

Ian Dallas is a Renaissance man of media production. After getting a B.A. in Film Studies from Yale University, he found work writing for *The Onion* and *Spaceballs: The Animated Series.* After his stint on *Spaceballs,* Dallas became a game designer at TellTale Games, and from there he enrolled as an MFA student within the University of Southern California's Interactive Media & Games Division. It was at USC that Dallas conceived what eventually became *The Unfinished Swan.*

Here's how he told his story to *Casual Connect.*

Sources of Inspiration

While enrolled at the Interactive Media & Games Division of USC, Dallas was required to come up with new game prototypes on a regular basis. One of his ideas was this: "What if we were in a white world and throwing paint around?" That simple question led to *The Unfinished Swan.*

Within a week of the initial thought, Dallas had created one square room with a hallway with a floating star, and at this early stage the color scheme was randomized. "It was pretty amazing how pretty that was," says Dallas, "just randomly picking colors and throwing them everywhere."

It took Dallas another eight months to develop the rest of the game's initial level. After a few weeks of getting feedback from people, he decided to remove the randomized color scheme and settle on a white world in which the player figured out how to navigate using only black paint. "The black seemed a lot simpler and cleaner," he says, "and it had a bit more of its own style." In fact, the approach was so solid that Dallas earned a contract with Sony to fully develop it.

On its surface, *The Unfinished Swan* has the same perspective and mechanics as a first-person shooter. A substantial difference is that while standard first-person shooters revolve around narratives in which a player shoots at other characters, in *The Unfinished Swan* the player shoots objects to better reveal and interact with the world. "Usually in a first-person game it's all about the gun that you're holding," says Dallas. But inspired by games such as EA's *Mirror's Edge,* Dallas knew that you could build an interesting game that took the FPS conventions in a whole new direction.

Children's stories were another, more important source of inspiration. The work of Chris Van Allsburg—the author and illustrator of *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi, Jumanji, The Polar Express,* and many other books—was particularly influential. Dallas explains the appeal of Van Allsburg's simple, lush illustrations this way: "There is something fantastical about them, but that they speak to the real world a bit. His books have very surreal elements that are meticulously illustrated so that you kind of believe in these places. The lighting is realistic even though they are charcoal drawings."

> "What if we were in a white world and throwing paint around?" That simple question led to *The Unfinished Swan.*

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* also influenced Dallas' work. *"Alice in Wonderland* would be the big one," he says. "Girl chasing rabbit through fantastical world. Our game is about boy chasing through fantastical world—there is a lot of overlap."

Crokett Johnson, best known as the author of *Harold and the Purple Crayon, is another children's author who inspired the team. Crokett's The Magic Beach* tells the story of a boy and girl who discover a magic beach that allows them to create objects by writing in the sand. "In the end of that book the tide just keeps coming higher and higher and the whole world gets submerged in water," says Dallas. "Our world ultimately ended up being submerged as well."

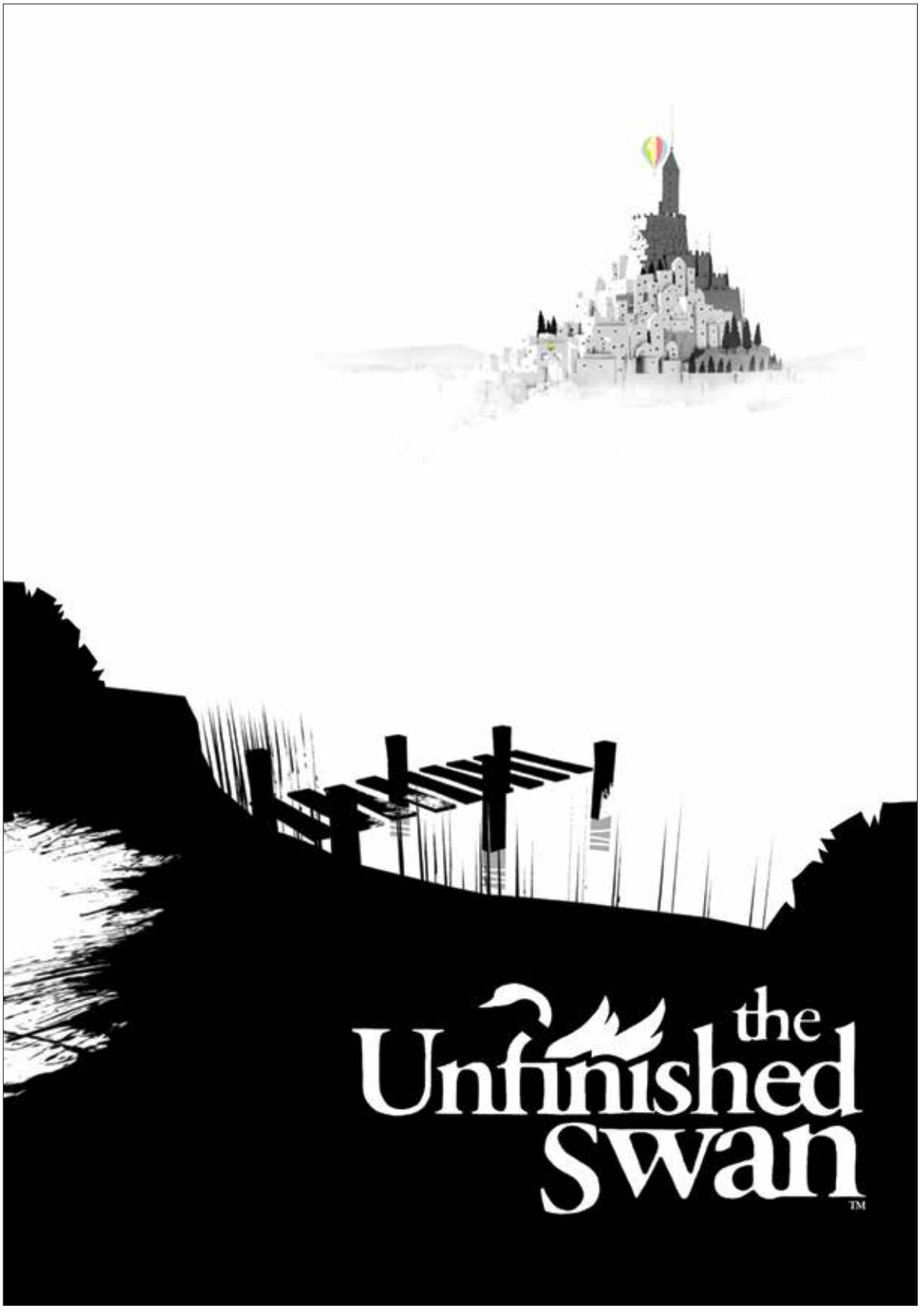
Dallas and his team also tried to evoke a sense similar to Jim Henson's work to help shape the game's overall tone.

Meanwhile, the cut scenes in *The Unfinished Swan* were largely inspired by the work of Shel Silverstein. "These black-and-white drawings with a lot of squiggly lines have this very personal quality that's hard to get in games because games are typically rendered in 3D: hard edges everywhere, everything very crisp and impersonal. The line drawing style of the cut-scenes owed a debt to the Shel Silverstein style as a way to evoke a personal touch."

Making It Work

The desire to create a specific and consistent visual feel to the game caused unique developmental challenges. For instance, many levels in *The Unfinished Swan* have users explore and learn about an environment by shooting black paint. In many first-person shooter games, the bullet holes and impacts left in a wall will disappear when the player leaves the

by Ian Dallas; *Creative Director, Giant Sparrow;* **Santa Monica, CA**



Ian Dallas on *The Unfinished Swan*

setting. However, to provide users with a sense of continuity and a reminder that their previous explorations of the world left a mark, Dallas' team wanted to design the system so that players could return to previous environments and see the changes they made to it.

This goal created a problem because traditional development approaches would have caused the game to slow down from memory constraints. Though he declined to provide a step-by-step technical explanation of how they did it, Dallas and his team found a way to make it work. "Give the game to a nine-year-old," Dallas explains, "they'll just start throwing balls at walls, and the game should support that."

Throughout *The Unfinished Swan's* development the game went through audience testing. Early feedback was "generally good," according to Dallas, "I was always surprised how

accessible first-person games are for people even with no experience playing them. And I think our game is helped by not having combat or a lot of time-intensive game-play. So people don't feel that they have to rush because for us it is more of an exploratory experience."

One aspect of the game that was changed due to audience feedback was the addition of jumping. "Players wanted to be able to jump," Dallas says, "and it seemed silly because there was no reason that you needed to jump when nothing in the game required you to jump." Dallas originally wanted to just have one button for the game being that this type of modest player interface would aesthetically match the minimalistic nature of the game. "Ultimately," he says, "because we got that feedback so often, we ended up adding jump just so that the players wouldn't complain about it."

Hatching a Giant Sparrow

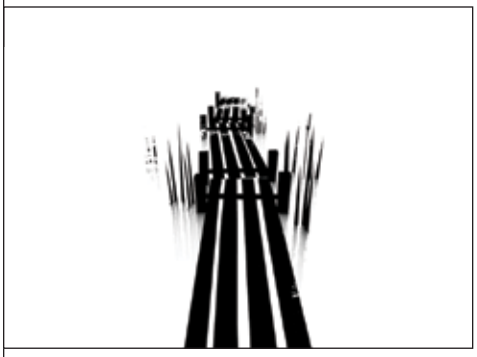
After getting his deal with Sony, Dallas realized that he'd have to create an actual studio in order to complete the game. And one of the first things he'd have to do for this studio is name it.

He chose the name Giant Sparrow because "with a giant sparrow it's not clear if it's hostile or benevolent. I think our games try to have the same feel—something that is both charming and a little darker, potentially threatening." Dallas found the idea of a giant sparrow to be whimsical but capable of addressing emotionally-interesting topics.

He admits that he has a thing for birds. "For me, what's interesting about birds is that they're the last vestige of the animal kingdom to survive with humankind," he says. "If you look out in a city like San Francisco or in New York—there's no raccoons, there's no wolves, there's no fish that can survive in these areas, but the birds still maintain a stake of wildness that sits there. Our games, similarly, try to have a feeling of something a little wild, unusual, and inexplicable there in an otherwise familiar landscape."

Sony proved to be the ideal corporate partner to bring that vision to life. "Working with Sony was just doing more of what I was doing before because Sony was very interested in having something that they had never seen before," Dallas says. "They were very hands-off throughout the project, trying to encourage us to go out on a limb and try very weird things."

As he began to assemble his initial team, Dallas intentionally kept it small, starting out with just two people and growing to just13 over the next three years That conservative approach to hiring was not merely money-driven. "I tried to keep the team really small because I was more interested in making games than I was interested in leadership and managing a team," Dallas says. "The more people we added, the more my time got spent dealing with management issues and scheduling and being in a lot of meetings."



Keeping a small team not only allows Dallas to focus more on the creative side of game development, but it also allows him and others at Giant Sparrow to develop a personal understanding of everyone else working at the studio.

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Ian Dallas on *The Unfinished Swan*

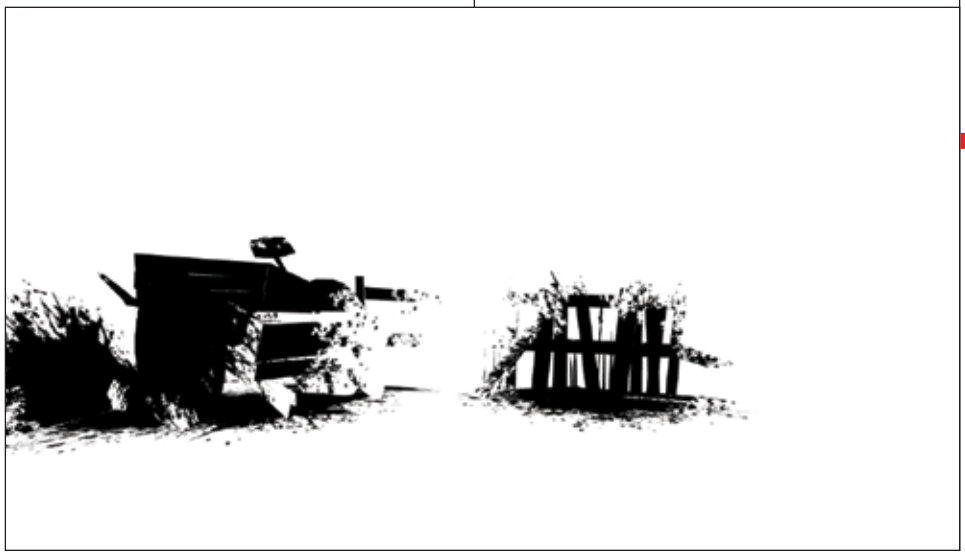
It's a dynamic that he feels would be lost in a studio with hundreds of people. Plus there's this: "Like any designer, I want to make the most interesting, beautiful, expressive version of a game, and that is the hardest thing to do. It would be easier to have more people, but we try to scope the games down so that they are relatively short and they don't have things like multiplayer that we know are really thorny to tackle." This allows Dallas to keep the team small because he finds that it creates "a more exciting and satisfying environment for us, and makes it possible for us to make games that are much more unusual than you'd be able to find on a 100-person team."

From a Bird's-Eye View

Dallas feels that it's important for newer developers to gain as much a mastery of their software as possible because "when you know the tools and you're faced with a problem, sometimes you can solve it on your own." However, he does acknowledge that this may, in fact, be easier said than done. "Every time I start to feel that I know how Maya works, I am mistaken."

That statement is emblematic of Dallas' hand-on approach to game development. "It's useful and more fun to be able to do a little bit of everything," he says. Having that range of abilities is also helpful during the exploratory, idea-phase of development. "The more ways you have to express your ideas, the easier it is for you to get them across. Being able to tweak things in Maya or write a little program to do something is a way for you to look at the idea from a different perspective and be able to make little small adjustments that turn out to have huge improvements in the overall design." Overall, given that "games are a very interactive medium, things that animate or that can be interacted with are often the most effective ways of communicating versus something like text."

Dallas' experience has also led him to have a unique perspective on the intellectual property he created. While many creators strive to maintain control over their products, Dallas has no problems with Sony completely owning *The Unfinished Swan*. "In my situation," says Dallas, "I have a lot of appreciation for Sony taking the risk that they did and funding this game. It also helps that Sony has been incredibly generous in letting us make games in the way we wanted to make them."



He chose the name Giant Sparrow because "with a giant sparrow it's not clear if it's hostile or benevolent. I think our games try to have the same feel—something that is both charming and a little darker, potentially threatening."

In the end, what Dallas really wants is simple: to do his own thing. "What interests me," he says, "is making games that people have never seen before. So if Sony wants to make a sequel for a game or bring out on another platform, I'm totally happy with that because that's not something that I feel I'd want to do. For me, I'm happy to let that thing have a life of its own—because I've moved on to something else." ❊

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Exclusive Interview

An Amazing Journey and a Ton of Fun

An Interview with Keith Shepherd of Imangi Studios

Based in North Carolina, Imangi Studios was founded in 2008 by the husband and wife team of Keith Shepherd and Natalia Luckyanova. After producing several successful games, the studio created the megahit *Temple Run*. Since the release of the first *Temple Run,* Imangi has gone on to produce a sequel and Disney themed variations. Casual Connect met with Shepherd to learn more about Imangi Studios' history, its approach to game development, and its future plans.

Q&A

Both you and Natalia had established technology careers. What was the motivation for founding your own gaming company? Was there something missing from your previous employments?

KEITH SHEPHERD: Natalia and I always dreamed of starting our own business and working for ourselves. We saw a radical and very exciting opportunity to do this when the App Store opened to developers in 2008. We both love playing games, and I've always enjoyed tinkering with developing games, so building a game was the first thing that came to mind when the opportunity presented itself with the App Store.

Before getting into Imangi, what are some video games you've loved playing?

KS: I've played video games since I was a kid. Some of my favorite games growing up: *The Secret of Monkey Island, Loom, Super Mario Bros., Sonic the Hedgehog, Contra, Might & Magic, Bolo, TradeWars 2002, GoldenEye 007, Mario Kart.*

Natalia got into games in college and played a lot of *Mario Kart* and *Tetris.*

While the mobile gaming market was still relatively new in 2008, there were still a large number of gaming studios in this area. How were you hoping for Imangi Studios to differentiate itself from other companies?

KS: We launched our word puzzle, *Imangi,* the first day the App Store opened. We were one of the first 500 apps out there. We weren't really thinking about how we were going to differentiate ourselves from other companies; we were just focused on making something fun and getting it out there.

Building on this point, when developing a game, what elements does an idea need to have in order for Imangi to turn it into a game?

KS: We focus on designing games specifically for touchscreen mobile devices. Key elements that we like to see in our games include:

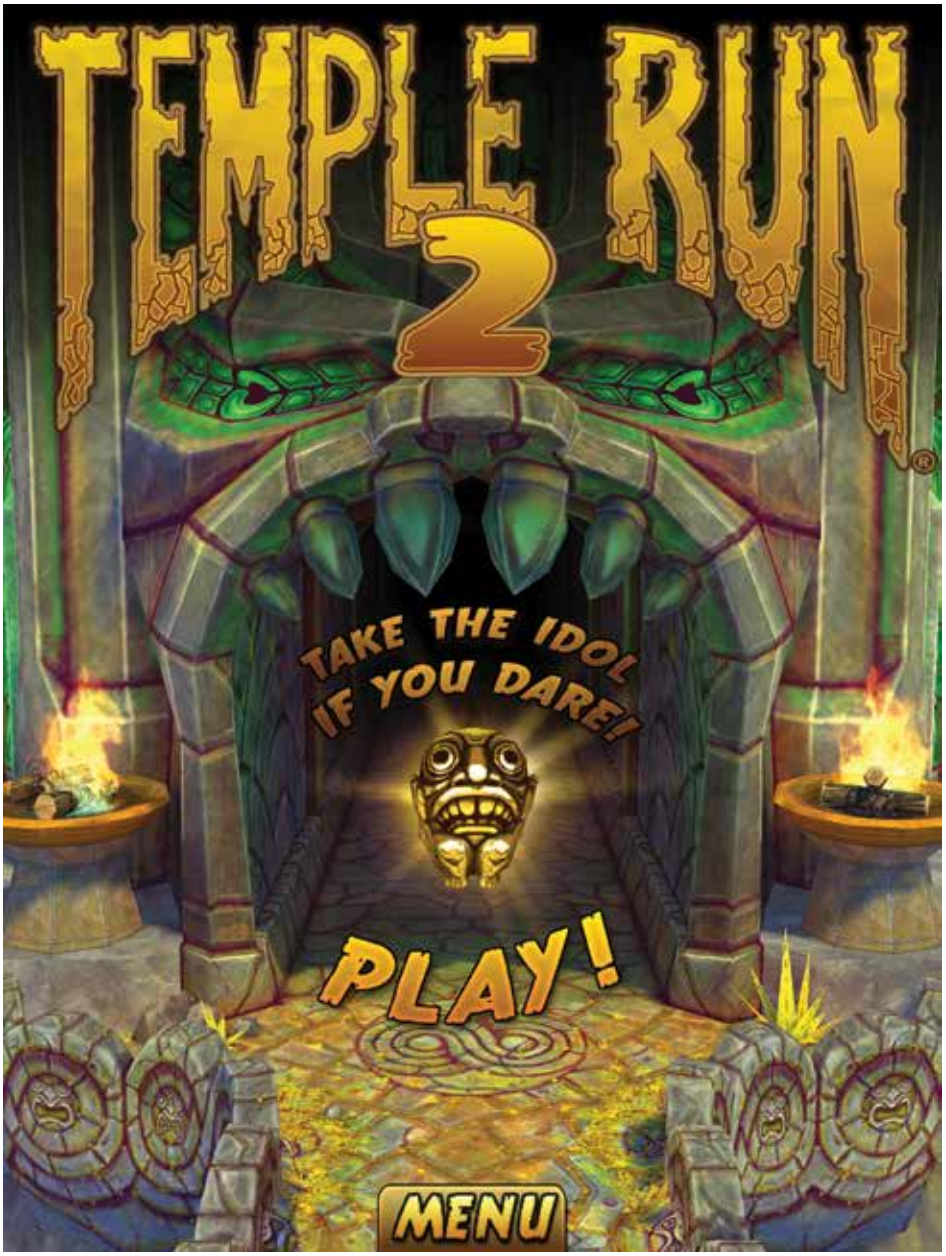
- Simple to learn, but difficult to master
- Quick pick-up-and-play mechanics
- Intuitive control schemes that feel at home and natural on touchscreen devices
- Easy-to-understand, quick tutorials
- Business models that fit the game-play
- Games that encourage sharing/social interaction

***Hippo High Dive* has an incredibly distinct visual style. How did this style come about? And did it provide any unique programming/design challenges during its production?**

Imangi Studios
Raleigh, NC

Keith Shepherd &
Natalia Luckyanova

IMANGI STUDIOS



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Keith Shepherd of Imangi Studios

The concept for *Hippo High Dive* came out of an all-night-long game jam we participated in at a conference. After the game jam we decided that we wanted to polish and release our prototype as a finished product.

There were a lot of games with "doodle art" at the time, and we thought it would be fun to do something vaguely in that style. What we came up with was a bit of a cross between doodle art, water colors, and paper craft. The end result was an interesting style we felt had a lot of charm to it.

How did *Temple Run* come about?

KS: The inspiration for *Temple Run* came out of our experimentation to find a better way to control a character in a 3D environment on a touchscreen device. Our previous game, *Max Adventure,* was a commercial failure, and during the postmortem we identified a few key reasons we thought it failed.

The main reason it failed: The virtual joystick control scheme was just a terrible fit for mobile touch screen devices—especially games targeted at a casual audience. Since we hadn't seen something better out there in other apps, we decided to experiment and see what we could come up with.

Through much experimentation we came up with the idea of using swipe gestures to turn a character left or right as he was walking a straight line. Once we settled on this control mechanic, we started to build a game around it. The right hand turns the character made worked very well in a maze-like environment, and since the character was already always moving forward, an endless runner-type game seemed to fit very well.

As we continued to work on the prototype, it looked more and more like the character was running on a wall of some sort, perhaps a temple wall even. So we started heading down the path of giving everything the explorer/adventurer vibe it has today.

From its beginning to its release, what are some ways in which *Temple Run* changed during its production?

KS: We had no idea *Temple Run* would be such a huge hit when we first released it. Our team built the game in about five months, which is pretty quick turnaround time. With such a compressed schedule, we had to really force ourselves to focus on the core of the game, which meant there were a ton of ideas we had that we just simply couldn't include in the first release.

One of the things that has been so amazing about the success of the game is that it has allowed us to explore all of those ideas and continue to improve the game over time. We've had the opportunity to add new worlds, new obstacles, new characters, and new power-ups. We've even had the opportunity to build a sequel and work twice now with Disney on *Temple Run* spinoffs. It's been an amazing journey and a ton of fun for us to continue adding content to the game and to give fans more of what they love.

In 2012 and 2013 Imangi Studios released versions of *Temple Run* that were themed after Disney/Pixar's *Brave* and Disney's *Oz*. How did Imangi balance the need to replicate *Temple Run's* mechanics while still making these newer games distinct?

KS: We had a fantastic time working on *Temple Run: Brave* and *Temple Run: Oz* with Disney/Pixar. Tie-ins are a great way to give people more of what they love with different environments and characters and twists. We definitely made a very conscious effort to balance the aspects of what people know and love about *Temple Run* with new twists and features to allow the spinoffs to stand on their own as great products. It's a difficult balancing act, but we always tried to think of it in terms of, "Would this make sense in the movie, and would this make sense in the world of *Temple Run*?"

What role does fan interaction play in the development of your games?

KS: We interact with our fans a lot, mostly through our social media channels on Facebook and Twitter, but also via email customer support. It's a great way to see how people play our games, to understand what they like and don't like, and to identify any issues people might be experiencing with our products.

Elements of our interactions with fans definitely influence our product. To give you an example, when we first launched *Temple Run,* there weren't really any built-in social components other than your basic leaderboards and achievements. Very early on in *Temple Run's* success, we started to notice that people out there were taking screenshots of their end game screen and posting their scores to Facebook and Twitter.

It was really neat that people were going out of their way to make playing *Temple Run* a social experience and sharing their scores with their friends. We realized we could make this even easier to accomplish, so we added a function to the game that automatically took a screenshot of your end game screen and let you post it directly to Twitter with a

Keith Shepherd of Imangi Studios

short custom message. People loved this feature, and I don't think we would have ever thought to add this if it weren't for us seeing how people were interacting with our game on social media.

How do you think Imangi Studios has grown since its first game? In particular, what business strategies do you think were deployed correctly that other companies get wrong?

KS: We've grown tremendously as individuals and as a company since we founded Imangi Studios and released our first game. When we started this business we knew next to nothing about what it takes to make great games, but we've immersed ourselves into this business and the culture of people who love to make games. I think if you look at all the games we've released chronologically, you can see how we've grown. It's very much a live journal of Natalia and me learning to make games.

As we continue to develop new games and issue updates to existing content, we've grown our company as well. We're proud to live in Raleigh, NC, and we have just opened our new office space for our expanding team at Imangi. At the heart of our strategy, however, we remain very much a small, independent local business, focused on innovation and making great mobile games.

How do you think the mobile gaming industry has evolved since you opened your doors?

KS: The market has grown by leaps and bounds since 2008. For one, far more developers exist now! The market is also much, much larger than it was in 2008—so many people now have touchscreen devices. Technology has also changed a ton: faster processors, better graphics, more input devices, high resolution screens, etc.

Business models have continued to evolve. Freemium wasn't even possible in 2008 on mobile, but now it's the dominant business model. Even though the market is always evolving, our focus has always been and will always be to make fun games people will enjoy.

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Keith Shepherd of Imangi Studios

The inspiration for *Temple Run* came out of our experimentation to find a better way to control a character in a 3D environment on a touchscreen device.

With the wide array of great ideas Imangi Studios has created—*Temple Run, Max Adventure, Hippo High Dive*—are there any plans to expand these intellectual properties to other media?

KS: *Temple Run* has reached hundreds of millions of players worldwide. We started to get approached by various companies wanting to license our IP for merchandise since we had such a wide reach. Over the years we've partnered with dozens of companies to develop licensed goods and build a strong merchandising program here at Imangi. These days we have apparel, comic books, board games, toys, and other products. It's very exciting to see something we created move from virtual into physical goods.

What are some long-term plans Imangi Studios has that people can look forward to?

KS: Innovation. Mobile gaming is still the space where most innovations in game-play seem to be happening. I think this is mostly true because of how open and easy it is to work on the various mobile platforms. That openness has really attracted a lot of indie developers, who also tend to be the ones most likely to take risks and experiment on game design. It's really fun to be a part of the community and to be around so many creative people all the time. Our goal as a company is not to lose that creative spirit as we continue to grow and be successful. We hope to continue to innovate within *Temple Run* as well as to develop new games. ❊

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Studio Spotlight

Aeria Games/PlayNext

YEAR FOUNDED: 2006
URL: www.playnext.com
OFFICES: Santa Clara, CA, USA; Seoul, South Korea; Tokyo, Japan and São Paulo, Brazil
EMPLOYEES: over 200

Soon after it released *X-Men: Battle of the Atom,* a mobile card game based on the Marvel Comics' X-Men storyline, Aeria Games underwent a transformation and became PlayNext. We asked JT Nguyen, COO of the studio both before and after the name change, to tell us about *X-Men: Battle of the Atom* and about the forces that have contributed to the evolution of PlayNext.

Bring on the X-Men

Prior to entering the video game industry, Nguyen earned a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of Illinois and a Masters in Electrical Engineering from Stanford University. He also received an MBA from UCLA's Anderson School of Management. However, in spite of these impressive credentials, real-world experience have provided the most meaningful education. "My most valuable experience has come from our time as Aeria Games, before reinventing ourselves as PlayNext," Nguyen says. "Aeria accomplished some amazing things in just a few years' time: We established a global presence, we ported and published over 30 games (both PC and mobile), and created a finely-tuned framework for optimizing the performance of our games."

Aeria's success and broad-based exposure eventually earned it the opportunity to develop a mobile game celebrating the 50th anniversary of Marvel's X-Men franchise.

Aeria's success and broad-based exposure eventually earned it the opportunity to develop a mobile game celebrating the 50th anniversary of Marvel's X-Men franchise. The studio embraced the celebratory nature of the game by including numerous X-Men characters and a variety of villains. Then to put their own unique stamp on the rich gaming history of the X-Men, Aeria took the characters where they had never gone before: the card battle game genre.

"There are hundreds of X-Men in the canon," says Nguyen. "With time travel and alternate realities that provide variants of the widely recognized X-Men characters, this profusion of characters lends itself to card battle games, with hundreds of cards available for collection." In addition, X-Men's rich collection of story arcs has also provided the studio a vast array of narrative material to use for in-game events.

With several different types of digital card battle game systems on the market, Aeria determined that the best battle mechanic would be guild vs. guild. "That type of card battle mechanic is popular in Japan and with a couple of top games in Western markets," says Nguyen. *X-Men: Battle of the Atom* features 20-player X-teams competing to determine the most powerful group. The teams then compete against each other to see who can inflict the most damage on infamous arch-villains from the X-Men universe, including Magneto, Dark Phoenix, and Apocalypse. While this game-play may come off as complex at first to Western consumers, it is likely to become more common as the social/mobile gaming market continues to mature.

True to the Franchise

To complete the game in time for the anniversary celebration, the studio began working on *X-Men: Battle of the Atom* while the comic book story arc was still being scripted. Consequently, the story arc for the game begins with the X-Men story arc, "Messiah Complex," which was published from October 2007 to January 2008. Nguyen says that Aeria se-

Aeria Games/PlayNext

"It is a great privilege to work with a company like Marvel on a property like the X-Men," Nguyen says, "but it also adds a couple of layers of additional complexity to game development."

lected this starting point for the game to give the studio "time to understand and catch up to the content of the eponymous story."

Aerea also had to be careful to work within Marvel's style guide—while still evoking "the range of styles in the comics from past to present." To further keep the game's visual style close to the comics, the studio also worked with Marvel artists. "It is a great privilege to work with a company like Marvel on a property like the X-Men," Nguyen says, "but it also adds a couple of layers of additional complexity to game development." Even so, Nguyen is quick to assert that the end result more than makes up for whatever challenges may come with collaborating on a popular franchise. "Absolutely worth it," he says.

"Success is not driven by the IP of the software," he acknowledges. Rather "it comes from making the games engaging and fun, which requires a really short development cycle—constantly churning out events and other in-game content." In short, while the overall intellectual property of the game—the characters, narrative, and other aspects—are essential, the game's release is just one more iteration in an ongoing series of X-Men entities intended to keep users engaged.

An Evolving Business Strategy

For a substantial part of its history, Aeria Games largely dealt with publishing PC games. As the studio has evolved, however, it has become increasingly energized by its success in mobile. When the team decided to fully focus on mobile development, PlayNext was born. Nevertheless, Nguyen says that PlayNext would never have come to be were it not for the things they learned together as Aeria. "The experience was invaluable as we began to develop games internally. Many of the lessons we've learned to increase key performance indicators like retention and monetization have carried over to our in-house development efforts as well, and really posi-

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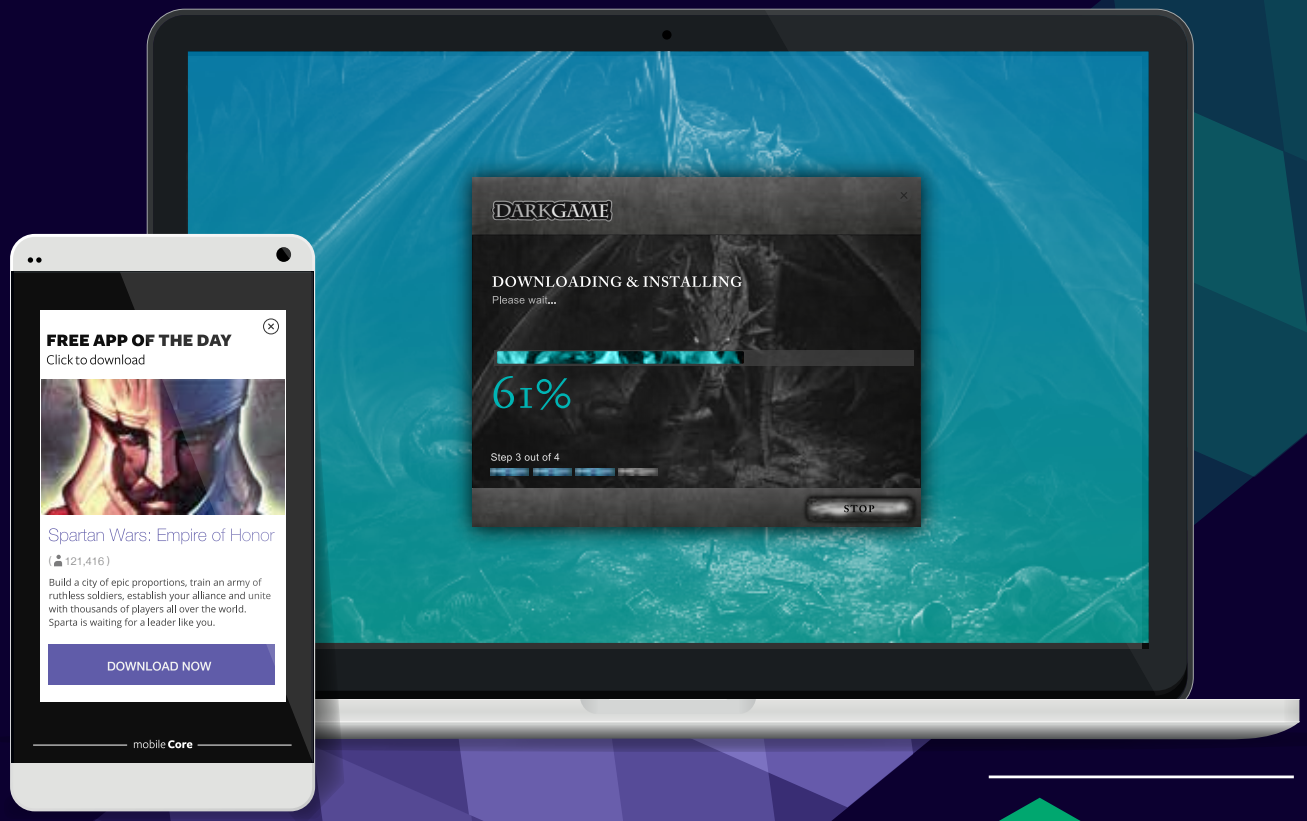
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Aeria Games/PlayNext

The end result more than makes up for whatever challenges may come with collaborating on a popular franchise. "Absolutely worth it," Nguyen says.

tioned PlayNext to be a formidable presence in the mobile space."

The transition from Aeria to PlayNext required selling the company's prior PC business, providing the capital that PlayNext needed to devote itself fully to the mobile business. Nguyen feels that the studio will emerge stronger from this experience. " "We are going to emerge a smaller and more focused team, with the benefits of speed and agility that follow from that," Nguyen says. "The further we get into this process, the more fun it is becoming." This smaller team has allowed PlayNext to begin this new chapter with a corporate culture that is highly collaborative and friendly.

As for the products PlayNext is planning to create, the studio is deeply influenced by its global reach. Given that PlayNext's staff understands how consumers approach gaming worldwide, Nguyen says that they "are of the belief that there is a fairly high level of commonality between gamers around the world." Specifically, the company is looking at Japan's gaming market. "We believe that a game that's successful in Japan has a strong chance of succeeding in Western markets, and vice versa. The scale of success is often different—a mainstream Japanese hit may be a niche win in the U.S., but we believe that winning games can be globalized."

The studio is aiming to further embrace social and mobile gaming platforms by creating other products modeled after Japanese card battle games. In particular, it will be working with another AAA video game intellectual property starting in the summer of 2014. "Outside of doing our best to create great games," says Nguyen, "we want to be a great place to work. If we can do our best for our customers and our employees, we will do well." ❊

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Learning Through Play

A Promise to Future Generations

I almost never see people from the educational games industry and those from the entertainment games industry in the same place. And in seeing that I see a huge opportunity missed.

Right beside our industry, unseen by almost all of us, exists another multibillion dollar industry, an industry in which we could do some good for the world, an industry in which quality products can still get noticed—and the market itself isn't so flooded that advertising budgets have to exceed development budgets for games to survive: I'm talking about the educational games industry.

Many of you know me for my work on AAA games, my dabbling in the social and mobile worlds or my show Extra Credits, but what most people don't know is that I've also worked with companies ranging from Pearson to Amplify. In doing so, I've seen the size and power of the educational games industry. I've also seen a tragic truth about it: The educational games industry knows its education inside and out, but doesn't know much about making games.

Floodgates Ready to Open

For all the conferences I've gone to, for all the places—both real and virtual—I go to hang out with other devs, I almost never see people from the educational games industry and those from the entertainment games industry in the same place. And in seeing that, I see a huge opportunity missed. If we can close that gap, if we can start bringing together the subject matter experts who are working on the educational side and the engagement experts who work with us designing games for entertainment, we have a chance to both do a great deal of good for humanity and vastly expand our market.

You see, right now the major educational software companies are selling billions of dollars into the school districts, and they're desperate for better, more finely honed games. But beyond even that, all the major educational software publishers know that the consumer market is the next horizon. As supplementing a child's education becomes more and more important, and as parents increasingly have access to and understand things like tablets and smart phones, the floodgates are ready to open.

We've seen this success with things like *Poptropica* and *Dragon Box,* but even though these are both excellent products, I'm sure any designer reading this will take one look at those games and see half a dozen ways they could be made more compelling and perhaps even more accessible. It's that perspective, and that expertise, that makes us invaluable to this industry.

And what does this industry bring us, besides opportunities for revenue? An untapped market. Not only is this space not cluttered like our app stores or download portals, but it's also an avenue to markets and customers we could never otherwise enter. In talking to PTAs across the US, I've universally heard statements like: "I wouldn't buy my kids games, but I'd get them things like *Oregon Trail*…." Instantly this makes both the parent and the child customers that we might otherwise never be able to reach, and, in doing so, perhaps we can convince them of the value of some of our other gaming experiences as well.

What Subjects Should We Cover

I often get asked by developers what subjects they should cover with games that educate. This is often a business concern: People are really asking me: "Where's the most demand?" However, this is the wrong question. If your company hasn't really experimented with educational games, then I have two pieces of advice for you:

You can't hit your audience over the head with the idea that your game is a learning experience—otherwise it will feel like work not play.

- *Start with something you're passionate about.* Make sure someone working on the project understands the topic fully and is glad for the opportunity to delve deeper into it. You will never engage people by trying to teach a topic you yourself don't care about.

- Games can teach every subject, bar none, but if you're just starting out, *math and science are the easiest to begin with.* Traditional game design already relies heavily on using logical sequencing, the scientific method, trial and error, and of course math; this makes it easy to translate those elements fairly directly into engaging mechanics.

Now for those of you still eager to know where the most demand is: As an industry we're in luck. STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—are some of the most sought after. These are the areas that both parents and the government are really looking to reinforce. After that comes language acquisition… then it gets into a murky haze of other subjects. But honestly, don't let this be your first concern; we've seen games about the Oregon Trail and city planning take the world by storm.

How to Start

All right, so you want to do this but don't know where to start? Well, the first thing I'll warn you against is aiming for school districts right away. Many companies I've seen are blinded by the vast amount of money the public school system has to offer, and thus they get caught in the trap of trying to build games specifically to be sold into the classroom. If you don't know what the Common Core is or haven't thought about how to make your game accessible under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, you simply aren't ready for this. There's a lot of bureaucracy and regulation that goes with building for educational institutions, and while this absolutely should be an end-goal for your company, it's just too easy for your project to die on the vine while you're trying to jump through all those hoops at the start. There's a vast amount to be made in the consumer space, and if you're successful there it'll be much easier to sell into schools.

So don't worry about school districts yet. Just make something great.

Second, don't worry about grants. This goes with the above, but I see many companies think they're going to make a quick buck off government grants. This is both morally destitute and untrue. Don't be those people.

Designing Your Game

Ok, so now that I've got you aimed at the consumer market, let's talk a little bit about how to design your game. The key to creating a great educational game is understanding the core engagement of the subject you're talking about. Why is it that we care about math or science? Why did we as a species care about the topic in the first place?

Once you understand what is at the core of the subject you are exploring, what makes it engaging, why we care about it, your job is to distill that core down to its most undiluted form and deliver on that with your game. For all its other faults, *Calculords* does this well. It takes mathematics and shows you that math gives you power, lets you control your world.

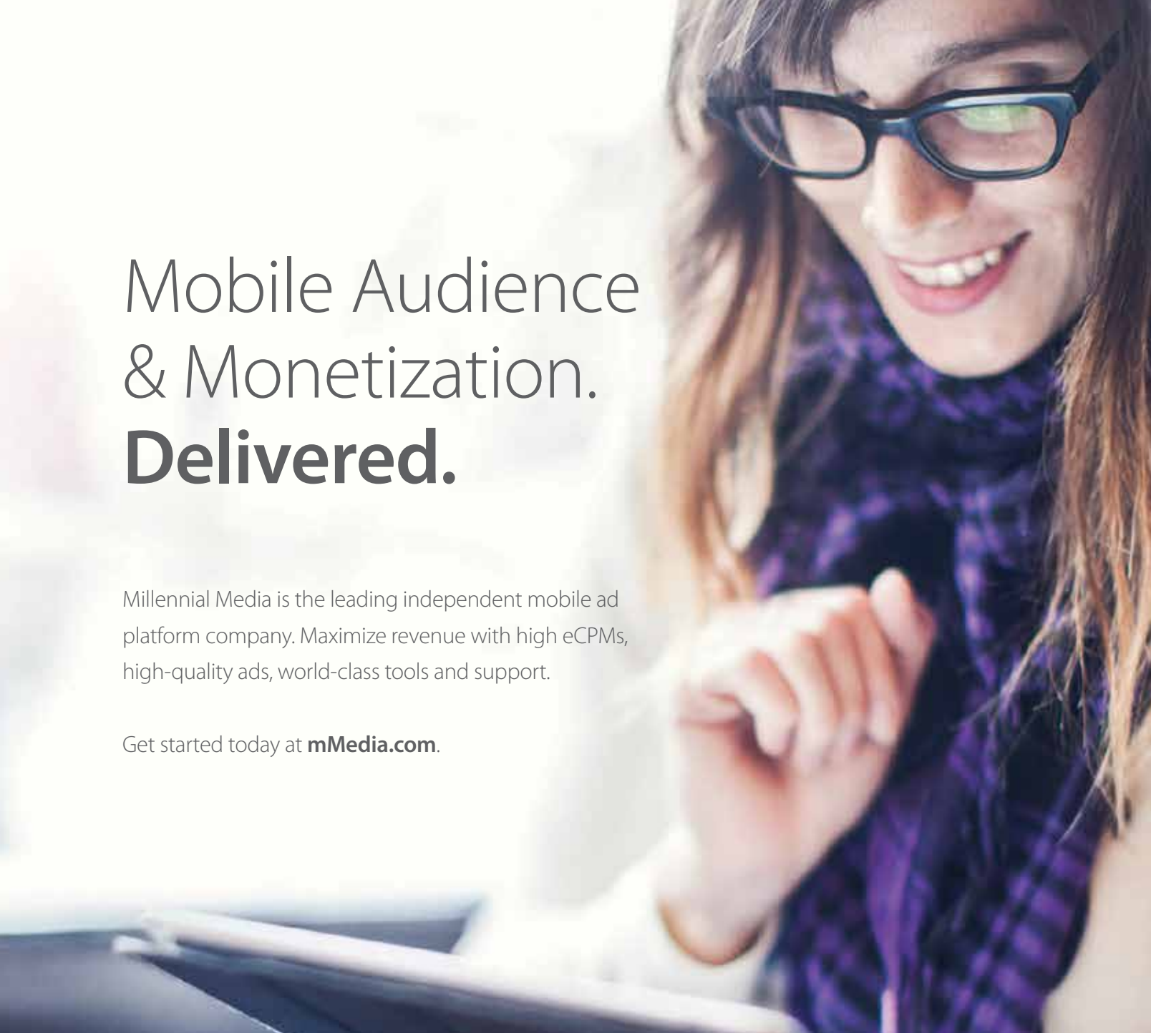
Next, consider whether you want to teach something or simply reinforce something that your player already knows. Is this learning or practice? Then, regardless of which you choose, liberate yourself from all your notions of "how the subject should be taught." Free yourself from the traditional model that you might see in a school and consider what unique benefits delivering this knowledge through a game may bring. If you don't do this, you'll end up making the same flash-cards-with-a-game-skin app that has become the stereotype for Edutainment—a stereotype doesn't sell. *Dragonbox* is a phenomenal example of thinking about how we can break the mold of traditional education.

Finally you have to think about transference. You can't hit your audience over the head with the idea that your game is a learning experience—otherwise it will feel like work not play. But at the same time you have to make sure that they understand there's something to learn from the game. Time and again we've seen entertainment games that have a lot of great things that players could draw from them, but the designers don't spend any time working on transference and so the players come away with nothing. Avoiding this is the final key to making a great educational game.

For Future Generations

I've made the business case, now I'll make the personal appeal….

For the first time in history we have an interactive mass medium, a medium that enables the audience to participate and explore and choose rather than simply sitting back and receiving. We have a medium that's so compelling that millions of Americans spend billions of hours on it each year. We have tools that can help educate future generations and get children filled with excitement (rather than dread) at the prospect of going to school. We've poured so much time and money and thought into this medium it's time we use it for something more than simply passing the time. We have all been given the privilege of a life in which we get to spend our days working on games. It's time we gave something back. ❊



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Enhancing Traditional Media through Augmented Reality

Like many technology terms, *"augmented reality"* is used so often in so many ways that its meaning can be difficult to pin down. For our purposes, you might think of augmented reality (AR) as software that overlays interactive digital content onto real-world objects through tablets, smartphones, electronic cameras/video cameras, etc. The term also refers to technology that uses real objects to activate exclusive digital material. This is in contrast to *virtual reality* which is typically deployed by enclosing users in a piece of hardware that allows them to become surrounded by a digitally constructed environment.

AUGMENTED REALITY (AR)
Software that overlays interactive digital content onto real-world objects through tablets, smartphones, electronic cameras/video cameras, etc.; also refers to technology that uses real objects to activate exclusive digital material.

in contrast to...

VIRTUAL REALITY
Typically deployed by enclosing users in a piece of hardware that allows them to become surrounded by a digitally constructed environment.

The real-world development of augmented reality began in the 1950s with the creation of the Sensorama—a machine that provided an artificial, multisensory experience. The term "augmented reality" wasn't coined until the late 1980s or early 1990s when it was introduced to differentiate AR research from virtual reality and similar technologies. Twenty-five years later, augmented reality has progressed to the point that digital developers are now deploying the technology in a variety of consumer applications, including new media projects in particular. Three examples of this trend are Gravity Jack, Resin's augmentation of the children's book *Two Left Feet,* and Marvel Comics' augmented reality app for its comic books.

Augmenting Reality One App at a Time

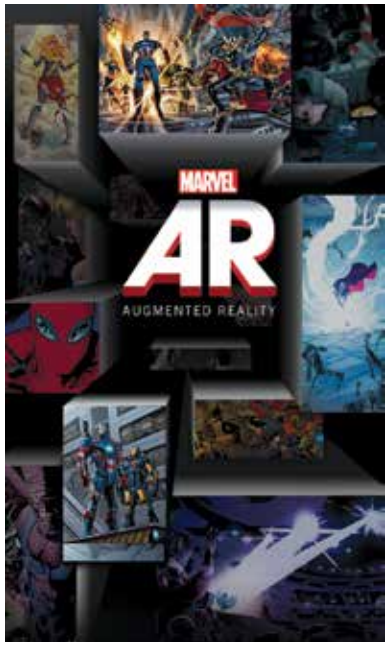
GRAVITY JACK

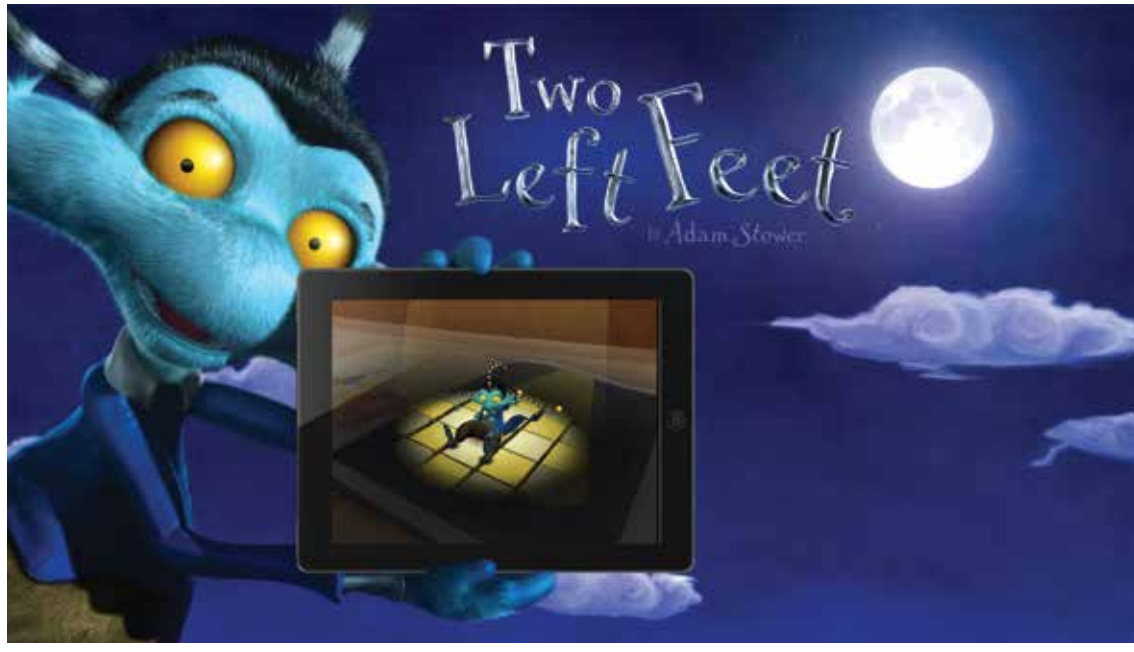
Luke Richey founded Gravity Jack in 2009 to be a development company specializing in custom software and augmented reality design. At the time, augmented reality was more concept than reality, consisting of (in the words of Director of Marketing, Ryan Darbonne) "nothing more than a few, gimmicky apps that provided little more than a whole lot of user attrition."

Those running Gravity Jack saw the potential in this new technology to increase user engagement and transform the way people approach digital content. So the company brought together a group of mathematicians, computer vision scientists, and augmented reality developers to build Gravity Jack's augmented reality presence. Within a few short years, the company had several patents in computer vision, marker-less tracking, and AR.

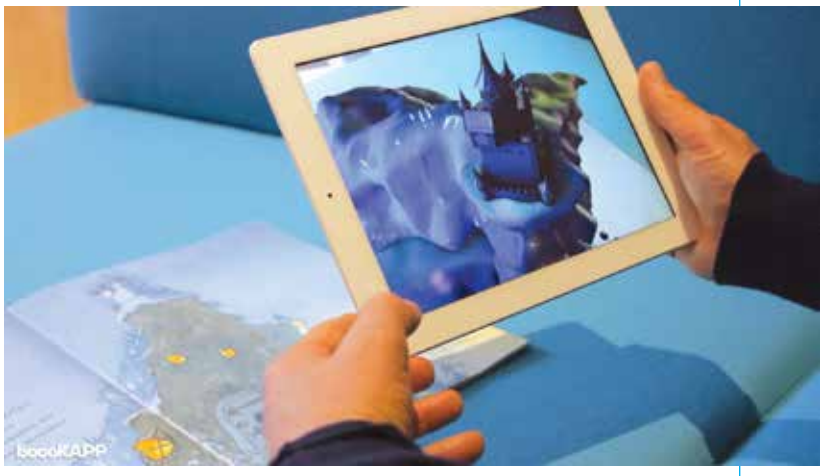
The most common deployment of their augmented reality technology has been enhancing consumer engagement with established brands. Gravity Jack has worked with Coca-Cola, Burger King, Disney, American Idol and more. Two projects that particularly stand out are the apps it created for TaylorMade Golf and WWE.

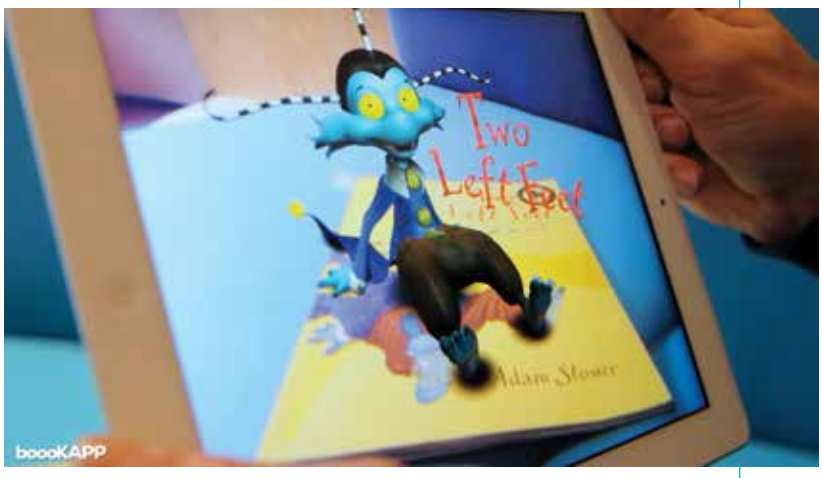
Circa 1948





"For children who cannot read, the ability to experience the story via narration provides the opportunity for independent reading from an earlier age."





For TaylorMade, Gravity Jack developed an augmented reality app called *R1 Virtual* for iOS devices that was released for a short period in early 2013. This app allowed users not only to see TaylorMade's new R1 driver in 3D, but also to adjust the club and run simulated shots. In other words, users were able to test the product without entering a store or pro shop. For WWE, Gravity Jack created and released an app in Summer 2013 that encouraged users to keep an eye out for all things related to World Wrestling Entertainment. Released for the Canadian market, the app, called *SlamCam,* granted users access to exclusive WWE content every time they scanned selected marketing materials, including billboards and Facebook photos (for example). In essence, *SlamCam* turned disparate promotional materials into a single scavenger hunt sweepstakes, providing a unique example of how augmented reality, real-world items and gaming can converge.

While Gravity Jack is finding new and inventive ways to deploy its technology, the field is limited by one crucial factor: hardware. "Augmented reality technology is actually capable of doing far more than current hardware (smartphones, tablets, even computers) are capable of," says Darbonne. "Once wearable technology (glasses, contact lenses, etc.) really boost what they are capable of—and make efficient use of battery life, processing power and cloud storage—that's when we'll really begin to see the complete potential for AR."

The Digital Expansion of Children's Stories

TWO LEFT FEET

Written by Adam Stower and published by Bloomsbury in 2004, *Two Left Feet* tells the story of Rufus, a friendly monster who loves to dance but often falls because he has two left feet. In 2011 Resin optioned the rights to this children's story. According to Grant Lovering, Resin's creative director and partner, "our ambition was to look at raising finance to translate the story into a 3D animated film." However, later that year Resin's team came across an augmented reality display and realized that this technology could provide a unique immersion into the story. Says Lowering: "Right then we said we need to look at this, imagine the potential, imagine the opportunities to take what we are doing in 3D animation and deliver that as AR."

What truly captured the imaginations of those working at Resin was not that AR was a new technology, but that it truly offered a unique way to engage a story. "You can explain to people what it does," says Lovering, "you can show them the promo film which demonstrates it, but until you grab an iPad and experience it yourself you don't realize the level of engagement it provides."

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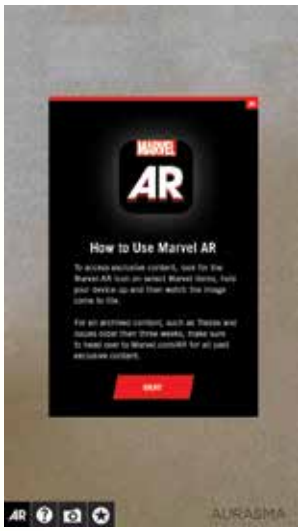

The Marvel AR app allows users to scan the company's comic books to gain access to unique content such as 3D videos, animated recaps, and exclusive commentaries from artists and writers.

The studio also realized that AR could be used to create a distinctive reading experience for *Two Left Feet* that offered children a new way to explore books. "For children it offers a different type of exploration," Lovering says. "They can potentially interact and cause events… and for children who cannot read, the ability to experience the story via narration provides the opportunity for independent reading from an earlier age." In other words, the interactive nature offered by augmented reality allows children to explore the story's world as a videogame can, while also encouraging them to engage the book's printed words. And by doing so, it inspires an interest in reading for children who either can't read yet or would prefer other forms of entertainment.

One of the many reasons why *Two Left Feet* was initially successful as a book was Adam Stower's unique illustrations for the story. Consequently, creating an AR app that could stand alone and work in conjunction with the book required Resin's artists and programmers to replicate *Two Left Feet's* visual style. Fortunately, Stower's illustrations provided a great springboard for Resin's animators. "They conveyed a real sense of movement," says Lovering, "and in a number of cases became great references for key poses for the animator."

Resin is now expanding the technology it developed for *Two Left Feet* to create other properties. In addition to more AR books, Resin is working on a new gaming app called *Barkley* that is a pet simulator that Lovering says "doesn't take itself too seriously." Beyond these projects, Lovering expects to see a rise in augmented reality features throughout the tech and entertainment industries. "The technology has typically been a representation of the future," he says, "and until recent years, has struggled to find ways to be relevant and accessible." Even so, he adds, "the proliferation of mobile devices with cameras and an app-based distribution platform has provided the opportunity to make the technology accessible and affordable to the masses."

Augmenting the Superhero Experience

MARVEL'S AR APP

Given how Marvel Comics has expanded its superheroes into other media over the years, it was only a matter of time before this company would branch into augmented reality. Announced in 2012 as part of Marvel's ReEvolution campaign, the Marvel AR app allows users to scan the company's comic books to gain access to unique content such as 3D videos, animated recaps, exclusive commentaries from artists and writers, character backgrounds, and other exclusive material.

Marvel Comics is often referred to as the "House of Ideas" because of its history of taking chances with new concepts. Given that comic books have been rising in price for years, it has become increasingly important to justify that cost. "We are constantly thinking about how we can enhance our products and experiencing those products," says John Cerilli, the VP of Content & Programming at Marvel's Digital Media Group. "Adding value to the printed comic experience is definitely one of the reasons behind Marvel AR."

People in the comic book industry have experimented with animating comic panels before. The popular name for this twist on the medium is "motion comics," and its overall reception by consumers has been underwhelming. "The big difference," says Cerilli, "is that we're not telling whole stories in our Marvel AR executions." For Cerilli, Marvel AR works because it allows readers to engage further with the story by providing extras—similar to those in Blu-rays and DVDs.

The challenge for Cerilli and his AR team is to ensure that their work on AR does not disrupt the

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existing production schedule for each new Marvel issue. In fact, Cerilli claims that the only impact his team has had on print production has been the insertion of the AR logos to signal to readers that there is additional content available to interact with. "AR works best when it's an enhancement or an extension of traditional media," says Cerilli. "I'm always skeptical of anything that's trying to revolutionize the way a story is told or something along those lines because at that point, you have neither a narrative nor a game, just something that's a messy mix of both."

Marvel's AR app has been extended beyond the comic books themselves. You may now see the AR logo on movie posters and booths at the New York and San Diego Comic Cons. Cerilli also told Casual Connect that "we have been thinking about other uses for it, so you never know where Marvel AR might turn up next."

Creating a Window to the Past

CIRCA 1948

Inspired by the photography of Stan Douglas—a visual storyteller and photographer known for the historical nature of his work—the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) decided to create an interactive, virtual art exhibit in a mobile app that allowed users to interact with the past and present.

This project originated as a screenplay titled *Helen Lawrence*—a collaboration between Douglas and screenwriter Chris Haddock. The NFB, however, was

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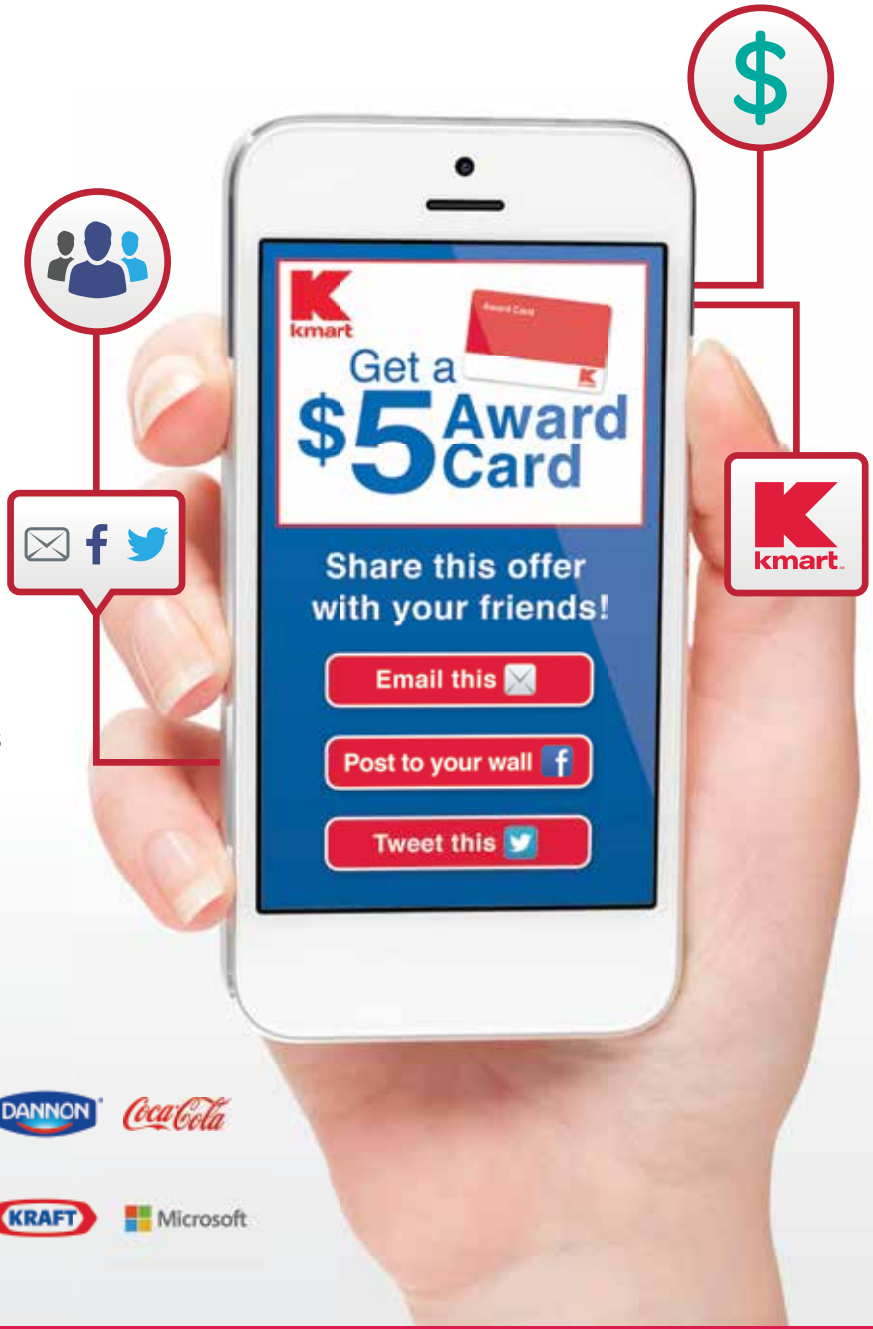

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uninterested in funding a fictionalized feature film. The Project Director on the National Film Board, Kelly Richard Fennig, did explain that "part of the NFB's mandate is to push the technological boundaries and innovate new ways to tell character-rich, Canadian stories," and that they did see potential in what Douglas and Haddock were trying to accomplish.

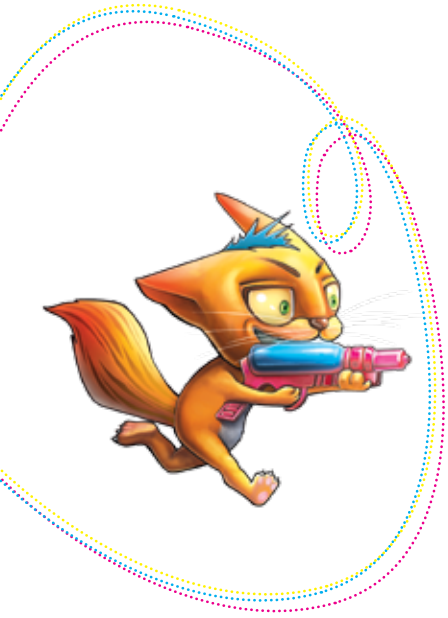
Inspired by the photography of Stan Douglas—a visual storyteller and photographer known for the historical nature of his work—the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) decided to create an interactive, virtual art exhibit in a mobile app that allowed users to interact with the past and present.

This interest evolved into an augmented reality app called *Circa 1948.* The goal, according to Fennig, was to create an app that allowed users to "see the modern world through their [own] eyes, and the historic world through the app. Where there is now a Starbucks, there once stood a speakeasy. It's a gimmick, but it does allow the user a more immersive experience in the world."

To streamline the process of creating *Circa 1948*, those in charge had to select a specific time period and locations. They chose 1948 because it "was a time when the city was on the cusp of change," says Fennig. "Soldiers back from the war were without jobs or, for some, even homes. The city was beginning its 'urban renewal' and claiming its casualties." In short, "the technological innovations of the latter half of the 20th century, marking our modern age, were just around the corner."

Douglas and NFB producer Loc Dao also decided to have the app center on two specific locations in Vancouver. In 1948, the city was split up the middle by Main Street. Says Fennig: "On the traditionally more affluent west-side is the site of the Hotel Vancouver: Weeks away from being torn down and relocated, soldiers from the war who have not yet received promised support from the government have taken over the building and are squatting in the 'tarnished dilapidated gem' of the city."

During this same time, the "working class" east side of Vancouver was filled with immigrants and migrant workers. And no place represented its blue collar and immigrant cultural diversity better than Hogan's Alley, which Fennig describes as "a culturally-diverse home to immigrant and migrant workers who turn into backyard entrepreneurs using whatever skills they have to find a buck, with some of their enterprises being less legal than others."



The ultimate point is that the year and locations were selected because they represent a nexus point that highlights the blurring of the usual divides between race, income, and urban renewal.

As this project evolved and developed gaming characteristics, the production team for *Circa 1948* had to meet a high standard for accuracy. It wasn't sufficient to merely be "inspired by" the past, as so many feature films might be. "Being based off of actual historic locations and being historically and geographically accurate and incredibly detailed—it goes beyond the standard fare expected from a game," Fennig says. "These places actually existed and were respected and reproduced in such a way that allows the user to see how life actually was, warts and all."

To create an interface that would allow users to immerse themselves in 1948, the app was designed so that a smartphone or tablet serves like a "window to the past," says Fennig. "Point the device up, and you look up; turn around, and so does the in-world camera." To truly exploit the augmented potential of *Circa 1948,* Fennig says that future iterations will include GPS and compass data so that those who are in Vancouver—in these actual historic locations—can actually hold up their devices and see what the world was once like where they stood.

As a complimentary experience to the app, there was also a display at the Tribeca Film Festival that allowed people to step into a room where the app was projection-mapped onto all the walls, giving a fully-immersive, 360-degree view of the *Circa*-world. That installation is currently on display at the NFB offices in Vancouver, with plans to take it on the road.

"AR works best when it's an enhancement or an extension of traditional media."

Conclusion—What Game Developers Can Gain from Augmented Reality Apps

As augmented reality programs become commonplace and mobile hardware is able to better handle the demands of this software, there is likely to be a rush to make games with AR software. By appealing both to new members of the audience and to the loyal fans who have already been engaged for some time, AR features might be of great help while building a stable community. As the technology matures developers will be able to challenge the boundaries between a video game and the world outside, enabling a new level of interaction between players and their favorite games. ❊

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by Ross Avner;
Principal, Point A2B;
Los Angeles, CA

Bark Louder, Bite Harder

Advice for Underdogs in the Golden Age of Games

There's never been a better time to be an independent game developer—but there's never been a harder one, either. Audiences, hungry for something new, have been devouring new games, and demand doesn't seem to be letting up. If anything, it's growing fast.

Both industry and traditional media outlets, somewhat understandably, have focused on the big winners—such as Supercell's *Clash of Clans,* King's *Candy Crush Saga* and *Flappy Bird's* viral ascent. But in doing so, they have missed the stories of the traditional Indie developers—the underdogs who struggle to survive, but are often the biggest drivers of innovation in our industry.

Steam Bandits: Outpost

Take Jason Fader, for instance. His studio, locaine, is made up of 10 people, all of whom telecommute from various cities around the world. There's no office space, no face-to-face meetings and no congregating around the ping-pong table for a social break. Fader must keep tabs on features in development for the studio's cross-platform game *Steam Bandits: Outpost,* while simultaneously keeping the big picture in mind.

Fader's struggle is by no means an anomaly. The good news for him—and other independent developers—is that we're in a Golden Age of Games. The bad news is that it's still going to be a struggle, and competing against long-established publishers will require careful and conscious planning. In order to break out, struggling independent game developers will have to discover new ways to finance game development, establish and embed data-driven discovery and monetization techniques, and plan on continuously fragmenting the marketplace to ensure distribution of power.

Feast or Famine

Over the past year, the video game industry has experienced an unprecedented period of creativity and growth, largely driven by game engines and tools which are being offered at significantly reduced prices. Access to these engines and tools has broken down many of the barriers-to-entry developers previously faced, including giving them access to a cross-platform market. One of the side-effects of this is that small teams can now create great quality content, then make those games accessible to consumers almost immediately on several platforms simultaneously. This "develop once, deploy anywhere" approach is what opened up this Golden Age, allowing anyone with a vision (and the willingness to learn how to code) to create games.

New game engines such as Unity, Chukong Technologies (Cocos2d-x) and Marmalade Technologies—along with distribution channels like iOS and Steam—have opened the floodgates. Unity in particular has seen tremendous growth over the past three years, largely driven by its ability to provide a game engine and tools that developers can use to create games across 19 different platforms. The company has over 600,000 game developers using its platform each month.

The end goal, says Todd Hopper, Unity's vice president of online services, is to democratize game development. Of course, by removing those barriers, the size of the marketplace has grown exponentially as well, which carries its own challenges. "It used to be that building a game was like climbing a mountain," he says. "We've given you Unity to help you do that. However, now you get to the top of the

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The good news is that we're in a Golden Age of Games. The bad news is that it's still going to be a struggle, and competing against long-established publishers will require careful and conscious planning.

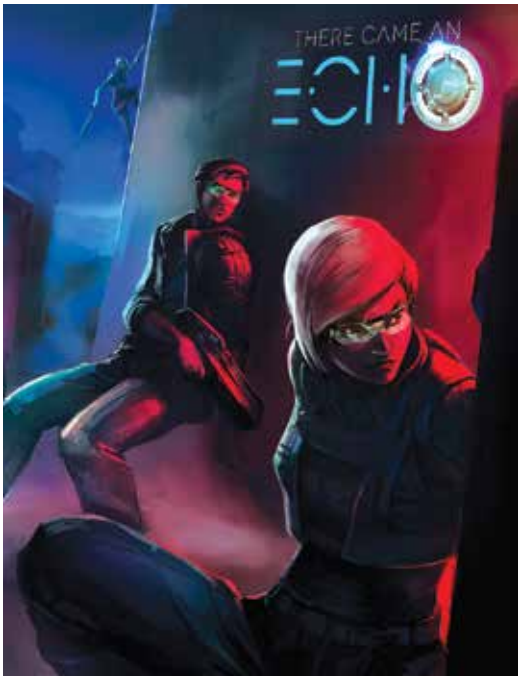
mountain and in fact there's another mountain you have to climb."

While Unity is introducing new tools to help developers climb the next mountain, marketplace saturation is a very real problem. And the increased presence in these new areas of big players, who can cash in on their name recognition, can stunt a developer's growth prospects.

There's money to be made, though—lots of it. According to AppAnnie and IHS Worldwide, people spent $16 billion on mobile game apps last year. That's just shy of a threefold increase from 2012.

Even so, that category was dominated by a small handful of companies: Gung Ho took in $691 million through iOS and $820 million through Google Play; Supercell saw revenues of $892 million; and King revenues hit $1.88B (with 95 percent of that coming from just three games in Q4). Those three companies alone were responsible for 25 percent of all mobile game revenues. Each has deep pockets and is able, with a carefully measured Life-Time-Value, to acquire users across various networks, squeezing out smaller independent developers in the process.

That feast-or-famine landscape shows a dynamic shift from 2008—when releasing a functional and basic game was a gold rush for early indie developers (remember *Tap Tap Revenge*?). For the independent game developer working on a tight budget, it's very hard to bake in a performance marketing budget to gain traction and fight those big conglomerates. And the struggle to break into the top charts can be even harder when fighting big names like Kabam and Electronic Arts. Independent game developers might be driving innovation in this industry, but the industry rarely provides guidance on how to navigate this challenging landscape.



There Came an Echo (banner art by Noe Leyva)

Create Fragmentation

As markets or industries mature, consolidation takes place, resulting in fewer, larger companies. These dominant players use their sizable war chests to keep upstart competitors from threatening their market share, in the process gaining advantages that may be displayed in many forms: greater margins via economies of scale, pricing advantages, larger audiences, and cross-functional opportunities for upselling products and services.

This has, of course, taken place several times in the gaming world already. Think back a few years to when a few large publishers such as Electronic Arts, Activision, and THQ dominated the industry. Or, even more recently, when the casual games sector saw Zynga become a power player by absorbing companies like MyMiniLife (which proceeded to build *FarmVille*), OMGPOP and Newtoy (*Words With Friends*). In just 21 months, Zynga acquired over 15 studios.

The counterforce against consolidation is fragmentation—the disruption that keeps an industry alive, evenly distributing market share and power. It's impossible to consolidate an industry as long as there is innovation disrupting traditional conventions. Indie game developers are puncturing the cloth of the established companies that once controlled the bulk of the industry's market share. (Need proof? Last year, *Minecraft* outsold *Disney's Infinity*.) As a result, console makers are heavily courting indie developers, knowing that innovation will come from them, not the larger studios (who are less willing to risk capital on new IPs).

Fragmentation's not isolated to content alone. Even the traditional business model for game engines has been disrupted. Three of the leading engine providers are fighting for the attention of indie developers. Epic Games has made Unreal Engine 4 available to anyone for $19 per month (plus a small percentage of each game sold), while Crytek has made its own CryEngine available for a monthly subscription of $10 per month. Both moves bring two highly regarded engines closer to Unity's model of offering free technology for all developers.

Creative Financing

Kickstarter has been an incredible tool for independent game developers in its short history, funding over 4,500 projects with total donations exceeding $100 million. It is the most visible opportunity in the marketplace for a developer to obtain financial backing without relinquishing any creative control on their game.

Crowdfunding isn't the only way to go, though. There are, for example, potential funding opportunities in partnering with Fortune 1000 companies. Apple and Starbucks have a joint partnership through which they plan game releases for Starbucks Digital Network—a promotional program Starbucks offers at its stores nationwide.

Starbucks isn't alone in this newfound interest in game content. Everyone from automotive companies (such as BMW and Honda) to public institutions like the University of Wisconsin are incorporating applications into their products or educational cycles. These organizations are looking for creative ways to expose their brands and attract new audiences.

Traditional toymakers are another avenue to explore. Video game consoles, mobile phones and tablets have begun to eat into their market over the past 10 years, with sales falling from $22.9 billion to

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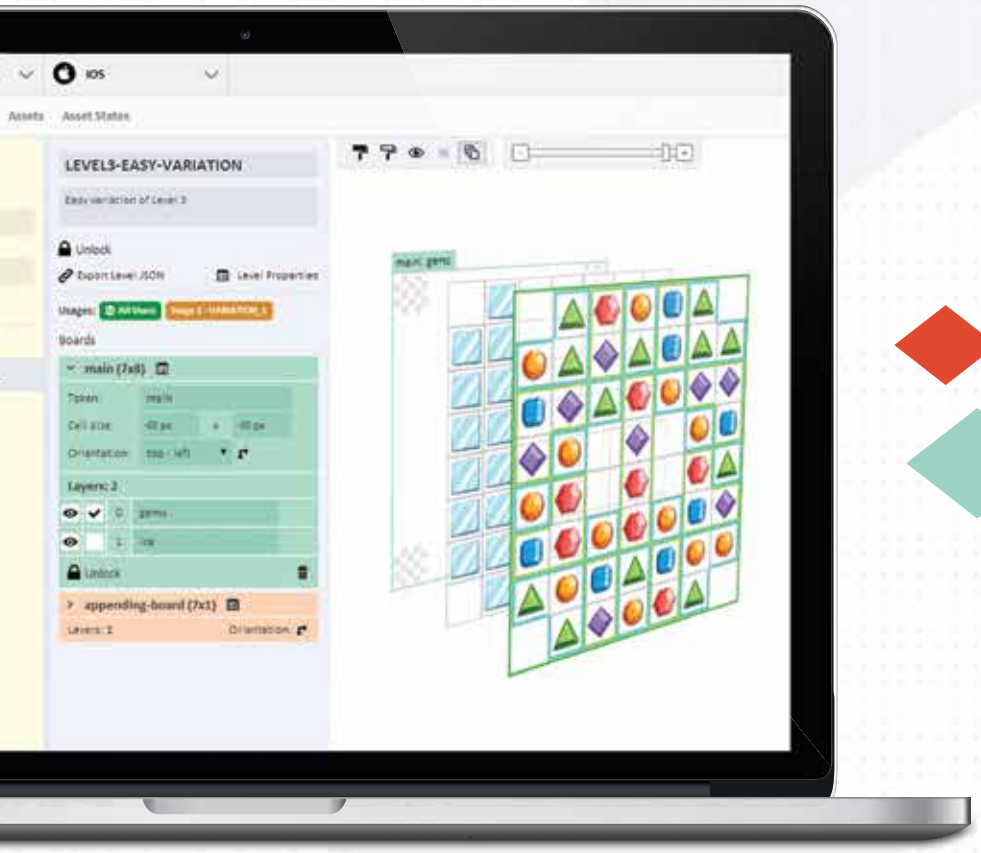

PLEXONIC

$21.7 billion, according to TD Monthly (a number that would have been significantly worse were it not for the resurgence of Lego). In 2013, though, Hasbro acquired a 70 percent stake in mobile game creator Backflip Studios for $112 million. Will others follow? Certainly, this is an indicator that traditional businesses are looking to get into digital games in more meaningful ways. Even peripheral game-experience providers, such as Intel or Jawbone, are looking to seed the marketplace with new technologies.

Galactic Skater

Jason Wishnov is one of the beneficiaries of this trend. The 28-year old owner of Iridium Studios, whose game is called *There Came an Echo,* has office space, four full-time employees, three part-timers—and plenty of caffeine to get him through the day. His ambition is to release his game on Steam, Xbox One, and PS4 this October with a one-time purchase of $15.

He had originally planned to fund the game solely through Kickstarter—and managed to raise $115,000 through the service. Midway through that campaign, though, he got a call from Intel's Perceptual Computing Group, which asked him to meet for lunch. Wishnov, thinking he might score some hardware to assist with development, agreed. What he ended up with, though, was much better.

Kelso's Quest.

The group instead offered to fund his studio in exchange for using Intel technology. It took 10 more months to seal the deal, but when all was said and done, Intel more than doubled the funding raised on Kickstarter. In exchange, Iridium agreed to support Intel's Perceptual Computing technology platform and provide feedback on Intel's developer tools. Best of all, Intel's investment did not give it an equity position in the company or its planned product, leaving Wishnov with complete creative control.

Intel has been progressively investing and sponsoring various technologies for over a decade. However, they are hardly alone. Microsoft is also on the hunt for innovative developers to participate in various programs. One of these is the Microsoft Accelerator program where indie developer startups undergo a three-month boot camp of sorts for developing in the cloud. Other game accelerator programs can be found in many regions, from Canada's Execution Labs to the Netherlands' GameOn to many more in Asia.

In an environment where it's becoming harder and harder to differentiate game products, it's worth reaching out to new and up-and-coming technology providers. Exploring opportunities with deep-pocketed organizations—whether in advance of or in conjunction with game development—could be a boon to cash-strapped developers.

Iterate with Big Data

Daniel Bernstein is a renaissance man of sorts. His time in the games industry spans two decades, starting when he founded and sold Sandlot Games—creator of the popular *CakeMania* and *Tradewinds* franchises—to Digital Chocolate.

Bernstein is a soup-to-nuts individual wearing many hats: artistic director, musician, coder, artist, marketer, not to mention the other traditional roles he plays while running a business. These days, Bernstein is leading UpTap, makers of *Galactic Skater,* a mobile game built on proprietary engine technology that gathers deep user analytics. Within a few days of the game's launch, Bernstein and his team were able to learn more about their players than Sandlot ever did throughout *CakeMania's* entire lifespan.

"It can be a bit overwhelming looking at thousands of data sets at once," he says. "But at the end of the day, you're always looking to optimize the two most important top-level metrics: retention and monetization. It's like a seesaw, with monetization on one side and retention on other, and you are turning the levers to get the perfect equilibrium, increasing features to increase ARPDAU [Average Revenue Per Daily Active User] and retention."

That information can be used to greatly improve a game, though. And innovating around user data is the calling card of some of today's biggest gaming companies, including King and Wargaming. With data in hand, UpTap spent several months iterating and tweaking the game, ultimately spending more time on adjustments than it did on the game's launch version, ultimately increasing ARPDAU by three times of its original launch metrics.

Indie game developers may not have gotten into this business to double as data scientists, but that skill is becoming an essential part of today's gaming world. The days of simply shipping a title and moving on to the next one are long gone. Today's successful companies not only make fun games, but they know how to do data analysis, think regularly about marketing, form business relationships to assist with distribution and promotion, and manage a game's lifecycle much more thoroughly than their predecessors.

"If you can't support your promotion ongoing, you're dead in the water," says Jeff Narlinger, found-

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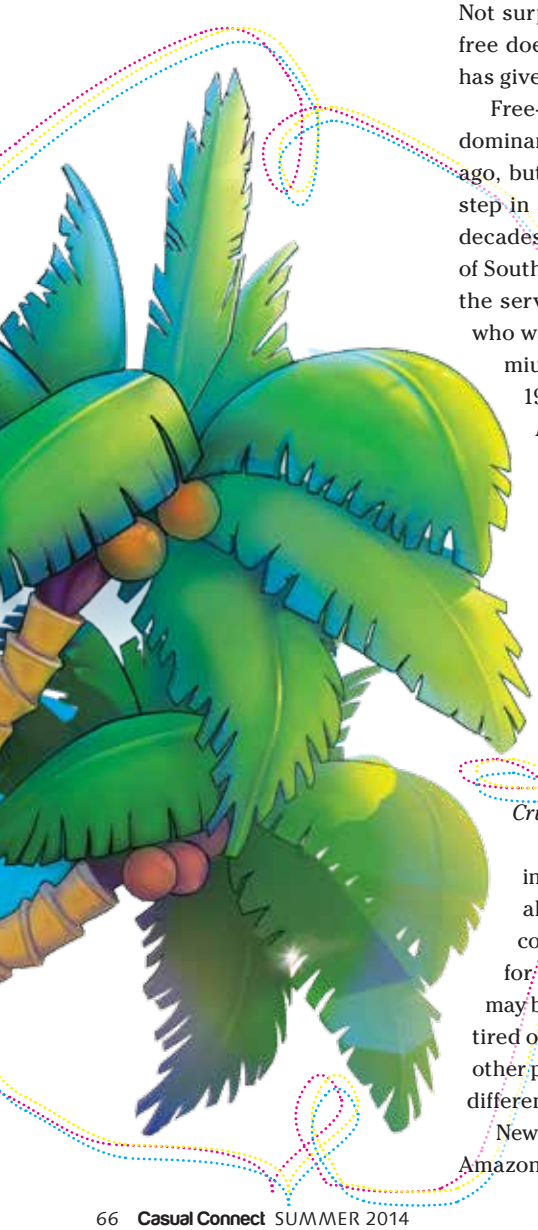
er and CEO of Avocoder, makers of *Toasty Boy* and *Kelso's Quest.* "You have to be in the Top 10 to really have a shot, and you have to stay there. Your actual game design is so critical in mobile, where you have to come up with highly effective monetization designs to cover soaring user acquisition prices—and figure out how to fund it in the meantime as you obtain those whales."

Today's successful companies not only make fun games, but they know how to do data analysis, think regularly about marketing, form business relationships to assist with distribution and promotion, and manage a game's lifecycle much more thoroughly than their predecessors.



The Ongoing Evolution of Free-to-Play

Not surprisingly, consumers prefer free apps. But free doesn't pay the bills for game-makers, which has given birth to some unique business solutions.

Free-to-play might have established itself as the dominant model of the games industry a few years ago, but it was really just the latest evolutionary step in a fairly old model dating back nearly two decades. Early on, free-to-play games coming out of South Korea were 100 percent free, but because the servers were often congested, active gamers who wanted a faster connection would pay a premium for uncongested server access. In late 1990's, successful web-based games such as *Neopets, Runescape and Maplestory* offered micro-transactions instead of a server-based access model and the free-to-play industry was born.

The problem today for developers? Player conversion is still a significant challenge. "Now that consumers are trained to consume free content, you put any monetization in front of them and they will turn off your app and start another one," says Bernstein. "Unless you have a game that has become a phenomenon like *Candy Crush,* most people play for free and grind."

While free-to-play will likely remain dominant for the foreseeable future, it will eventually subside as the revenues it generates for companies begin to dissipate. That could come for many possible reasons. Cost of acquisition may become unaffordable. Users may simply grow tired of it. Or game consumption may be driven to other platforms that lend themselves to something different.

New financial models are already being explored. Amazon's Mobile Associates API, for example, enables in-app purchases of physical goods, creating an environment where in-game currency can be translated into both virtual and real-world merchandise. Imagine a game that is free—and free of micro-transactions. Instead, monetization occurs when users want to collect physical representations of characters they unlock and purchase those collectibles from Amazon (or another online retailer).

While the free-to-play model may be financially sound, there's a growing camp of developers who feel it negatively disrupts game play. "iOS and Android games are like trail mix," says Wishnov. "Do I enjoy trail mix? Yes. Can you make money selling trail mix? Sure. But I don't want to make trail mix, I want to make dinner. My goal isn't to nickel-and-dime cash out of players. It's to make something meaningful that players remember long after they've ceased playing."

Fader and his team at Iocaine say they are absolutely against allowing the free-to-play model to drive advancement of *Steam Bandits: Outpost.* Instead, the studio plans to monetize the game by offering its players purchasable vanity items, such as outfits for their characters. It's a model that's similar to Peter Molyneux's "invest to play" concept, which theorizes that users who spend hours on a specific game will eventually purchase these sorts of in-game items.

Wishnov's not a big fan of micro-transactions, either. It's a model, he notes, that would never work on big brand games like *Super Mario Bros.* "Games that are $50 to $60 deserve to be that price," he says. "When you have in-app purchases, the things you offer should be cosmetic—unlocking new content—but should never give people who are willing to pay a competitive advantage over those who don't. [Gaming today] is not about skill anymore. It's about how much money I can spend to get ahead. *League of Legends* wouldn't have survived if it was structured like that."

Barking and Biting

There's no denying the importance of independent game developers in today's gaming world. The passion, creativity and freshness they bring to the industry is crucial in attracting new players and retaining the interest of long-time ones.

But it's about a lot more than just making a fun game today. Successful developers need to be more organized than ever—and more creative when it comes to finding sources of capital—both initial funding and ongoing monetization of their games. They need to be data scientists. And they need to have an eye toward all of the coming trends.

It may not be what they signed up for, but it's the only way to stand out in an increasingly crowded market. And it's the only way to provide the fragmentation that this games marketplace so desperately needs. ❊

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Swimming to the Top of the Charts

How Our Aquarium Game Became a Reality

Our first objective was to learn as much about the *Tanked* audience as possible. We started by reading viewers' comments on social media and instantly identified a consistent theme.

As a family of four with two young children, we are very fond of Animal Planet's *Tanked* reality TV show. It follows the antics of two brothers-in-law, Wayde and Brett, as they run the largest aquarium manufacturing company, Acrylic Tank Manufacturing (ATM). No job is too big, too far away, or too outlandish, as Wayde and Brett travel the world to create custom tanks for the rich and famous, including rock stars, actors, athletes and the biggest brands and charities.

One day we were feeling a bit blue at the Game Pill office, so we thought of contacting ATM to build us a fish tank. We called the guys over at Acrylic Tank Manufacturing and decided to set up a meeting to discuss the tank we wanted. The guys from ATM were very accommodating. They steered us in the right direction and even put up with our last-minute requests to incorporate touchscreen glass technology into the tank.

An Unexpected Client

In the midst of our tank-building experience, we were asked by Animal Planet and Nancy Glass Productions to develop an app based on the show. We couldn't have been more pleased! Creating a game for a popular television show is definitely a challenge, as fans have certain expectations you must not lose sight of. Game Pill was committed to delivering the best game possible, while staying within the given parameters. Some of the key things we had to consider were:

» ***The brand and the audience:*** It was critical that we understand the viewers and ensure that we were engaging with them on their terms. We had to know the characters and appreciate how much character involvement viewers would expect in the app.

» ***Relevance to the brand:*** We needed to ensure that the app was fun, entertaining, and useful to viewers. Therefore, we had to determine what people found interesting, innovative and engaging so that they would want to play, continue to play, and share the app with their friends.

Luckily, we were fans of the show and knew the characters well. However, our knowledge of fish tank building was limited to what we had learned from watching the show each week.

And So It Begins

Our first objective was to learn as much about the *Tanked* audience as possible. We started by reading viewers' comments on social media and instantly identified a consistent theme. Most *Tanked* fans wanted their very own custom tank—just like we did. Some fans even requested that their pools be converted into custom tanks (now that is dedication!). After all our research what *Tanked* viewers found interesting and useful became clear. We decided to give them what they were asking for—the opportunity to have the experience of creating their

by Mike Sorrenti;
President, Game Pill Interactive;
Aurora, ON

We made sure that we collaborated with the producers and creators of the show from the outset, as they brought amazing vision, insights, and (most of all) passion to the project. This partnership ensured the preservation of the *Tanked* brand and an image consistent with the television show.

very own personal custom tanks, including the ability to decorate and maintain them. We also wanted them to be able to share their tank designs with friends. We knew it was imperative that we follow the vibe of the show to uphold the *Tanked* brand.

Our second and equally important objective was to develop a game that people would want to play, share and return to. We knew that the style of our app needed to be consistent with the game-play, so we went with a cartoon look-and-feel. We were careful to incorporate Wayde and Brett in a fun and realistic way and to incorporate decorations and fish types covered in past episodes. Each action—from decorating and maintaining the tank to feeding and playing with the fish—was made as fun as possible for both game players and fans of the show.

Welcome to Reality TV

We were lucky and excited to have so much involvement from the producers and creators of *Tanked*. We made sure that we collaborated with them from the outset, as they brought amazing vision, insights, and (most of all) passion to the project. This partnership ensured the preservation of the *Tanked* brand and an image consistent with the television show.

Game Pill is proud to have worked with many companies to extend their brands to the virtual world. However, this is the first time we had an opportunity to work on a reality television product. This new experience taught us that reality television production has much shorter timelines than animated production. From the start, we realized it is important to clearly identify timelines and manage expectations. In reality television, a new idea or a different arc in a storyline happens on the fly. This is not the case in the gaming world, where changes—even those that may appear small—can require significant re-working of code and new animations, resulting in additional man-hours and potential delays. Since we develop games daily and work with many partners, timelines are second nature to us. However, it is critical for the success of the game and the collaborative relationship to educate partners on the process of game-making early on to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

One of our biggest game design challenge was creating an emotional tie between players and their tanks, including the most important inhabitants of the tank, their beloved fish. We added common functions like feeding and playing games with one's fish, but it didn't seem to be engaging enough. The solution we came up with was to include the ability to name your fish to further personalize the experience. We also added the option of purchasing a fish egg

Tanked Aquarium Game's* best rankings

#9 in Top Games
#5 in Simulation Games
#4 in Adventure Games
#13 in Kids Games

**as of April, 2014*

To swim with the fishes, please download the *Tanked Aquarium Game* here:
https://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/id741671891?mt=8

To watch the *Tanked Aquarium Game* trailer, swim over to:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ilPPdz6rQsA

To watch Game Pill's appearance on Animal Planet's *Tanked*, check out:
www.gamepill.com/tanked_appearance

and taking care of it. This is a really fun feature because players never know what kind of fish will hatch from their eggs. Finally, we added voice to the fish, a feature we hope to expand on in future builds.

Timing the game to release in conjunction with the live broadcast of the television episode was one of our game production challenges. Game Pill and the *Tanked Aquarium Game* were featured in the episode, "Betty White's Got an App for That," which involved being a part of pre-production, taping and the overall episode storyline. It was the first time Game Pill was involved in a television show production. I felt like a fish out of water being in front of a camera, but luckily it all turned out well.

In addition to the time needed for taping the episode, we had to ensure that we allowed enough time for Apple to review the game and make it live in time for the show air date. Unfortunately, there was an issue with the submission (ouch!). It turned out that some of the plug-ins we were using in the game were not updated properly after a software upgrade to our game engine. This was an unforeseen issue that didn't come up during testing and had to be addressed quickly. We reached out to the plug-in vendor, but they were not as rushed as we were to find a fix, so we had to batten down the hatches and find a solution ourselves. This caused tensions to rise, as the air date was locked in. It would have been disastrous if the app being promoted in the show was not available for viewers to download! Needless to say, we were drowning in stress.

In reality television, a new idea or a different arc in a storyline happens on the fly. This is not the case in the gaming world, where changes—even those that may appear small—can require significant re-working of code and new animations, resulting in additional man-hours and potential delays.

Go Time

Luckily, with little time to spare, the game was approved. We alleviated a lot of time-sensitive pressure by working directly with Nancy Glass Productions, the producers of *Tanked.* Nancy's vision, collaboration and creativity were key to the partnership. Immediately after the show aired, the reviews poured in and traffic to our website was off the charts. Collaboratively, Nancy and I continued to design updates for the app to ensure that players enjoyed the *Tanked Aquarium Game.* Game Pill worked frantically to update the game to address all comments from our fans and troubleshoot all device-specific issues. We offered 24-hour customer support, even ensuring that each query was answered personally and with an aquatic theme.

We are extremely proud to say that *Tanked Aquarium Game* swam to the top of the iTunes paid charts, hitting the top 10 list, and has been doing well ever since. This shows that understanding and listening to your audience, staying true to your brand, and working in close collaboration with interactive producers and brand owners make up the recipe for a swimming success! ❇

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Now We Are Talking

A Conversation with Double Fine's Greg Rice

A lifelong fan of video games, Greg Rice left Med School at The University of Iowa to move out west and pursue a career in the entertainment industry. Greg's career eventually led him to Tim Schafer's studio, Double Fine Productions—the indie studio that has recently been the subject of a documentary related to its success using Kickstarter. Double Fine is also known for its annual in-house game-jam known as Amnesia Fortnight. *Casual Connect* recently talked with Rice to learn more about his background, Double Fine's approach to game development, and its current projects.

When you were a child, what video games did you enjoy playing? And when did you realize that you could make a career out of making video games?

My family didn't purchase a PC until I was in junior high, so most of my really early experiences with games were console-based, starting with the NES. After *Mario,* I was totally hooked and got pretty much all the major consoles from there on out. I subscribed to *Nintendo Power, EGM,* and the like and got really interested in dissecting games and in what makes good ones good. But it still felt like a hobby and not anything that I could ever in a million years do for a career.

Really, the only PC games that I played until college were Tim's [Shafer's], and that was because I had a buddy with a PC that turned me onto them. Those games really were a big deal for me. It was the first time I remember seeing someone's name on a box and thinking about how games are made by a team of people instead of wizards and robots. (Okay, I guess there are some of those in the game dev scene too.) Those games also showed me early on that games could be art and can provide completely unique experiences, the likes of which we're still only scratching the surface on.

By the time I graduated high school I was totally obsessed with everything out there in the game world, but a career in games still felt like a distant reality. It wasn't until after graduating with a music degree and then getting three years into medical school that I couldn't keep it bottled in anymore and picked up to head out for California with the video game industry in my sights.

So how did you break into the business?

I did do a little bit of testing on *Guitar Hero* when I first made it to LA, but my first big gig was at a talent agency called CAA [Creative Artists Agency]. They're mostly known for representing big film and music talent like Steven Spielberg and Radiohead, but they do have a video game department as well. I worked there as an assistant to Seamus Blackley, the creator of the Xbox, who at that time was the head of the games division of CAA.

It was a really great opportunity for me that led to quickly meeting many important people in the industry who were responsible for games I had admired for years. It also was a crash course on the business behind games, as our main focus was to

set up the most talented game designers in the industry with a deal for their next big game, whether through a publisher or alternative means. That's what led me to meeting Tim and eventually landing at Double Fine, as he was a client of the agency. We helped set up a deal for *Brutal Legend* with EA after it was dropped in the Activision/Vivendi merger.

How did you adapt from the Midwest to California?

I've always been a big city kind of guy, so I was ready take on a change. Going from Iowa straight to Hollywood was a bit of a shock, but I dove in headfirst and found my way. Still, I never felt quite at home until I made the move to San Francisco. It's truly an amazing city full of beautiful scenery, smart, happy people, and amazing food—one I hope to call home for a long time!

A Conversation with Double Fine's Greg Rice

How do you think Double Fine's approach to game development differs from other companies'?

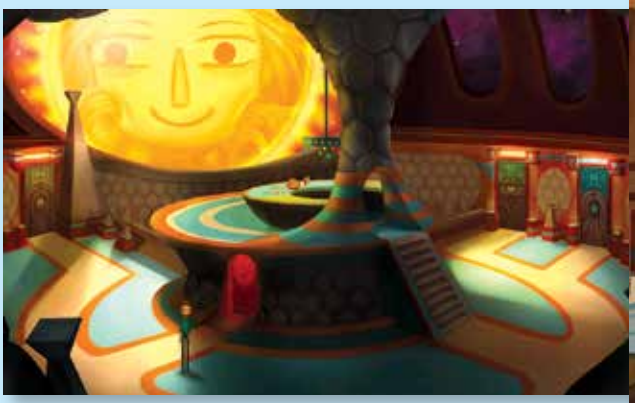
Every studio has its own methods, but what I think makes Double Fine so special is a commitment to a creative spirit in all disciplines. There's a real desire to do something new and different, which is evident in the amount of new IP we've produced in the last 13 years and the variety of art styles, genres, and even business models explored in those games.

Double Fine has participated in Humble Bundle packages. What do you think are some of the benefits of a studio working with Humble Bundle?

In this digital age it's increasingly important that distribution channels provide a quality service that has both the creator and user's needs in mind, and this is something the guys at Humble definitely understand. In providing multiple payment and platform options with a pay-for-what-you-want model, they've broken down all the major barriers that might otherwise lead someone to pirate rather than purchase. The fact that they have well-curated, high-quality games and have raised millions of dollars for charity is the most delicious icing on top of an already tasty cake.

Double Fine's first game was* Psychonauts. *How do you think its success shaped the studio's development and its identity as a brand?

Psychonauts remains one of my favorite gaming experiences of all time. It continued Tim's tradition of making wholly unique games full of incredibly well-written characters and beautiful art, but the design of that game, specifically the variety of mechanics explored in each level, felt like a whole new thing for



Tim. Looking back, it's really easy to see that as the first step in what ultimately would become a really diverse portfolio of games for the studio.

In 2010, Tim Schafer mentioned that the pirating of* Psychonauts *was one of many factors that suggested that the game was popular enough to justify creating a sequel. Given that piracy is so prevalent, how do you use piracy to the benefit of an industry that needs money to survive?

Ultimately, pirates gonna pirate. We see it as more people are playing our games that may not have played otherwise. The hope is that our games can speak for themselves and win over our players as fans of the studio. There will always be a chance to sell to that person again, so hopefully we will have provided them with an experience of worth and they will lend us their support when the next thing drops.

Double Fine still makes Flash games. What is the benefit for a console game developer spending time creating Flash games?

For us, it's an easy way to have a bit of fun when a silly idea comes up. Our fans seem to enjoy getting these little nuggets from time to time.

Double Fine Productions recently used Kickstarter to raise money for an upcoming game. How does this sort of financing alter the landscape of the video game industry?

A Conversation with Double Fine's Greg Rice

We've had a really great experience with Kickstarter thus far. With *Broken Age* and *Massive Chalice*, Kickstarter has provided us with the funding needed to create games entirely on our own terms—which is a really liberating feeling. We've really grown close to our community throughout this process and it's been great to share this experience with them. This creative freedom and direct connection to our players throughout the development process will only result in better games. Kickstarter isn't for every game or every studio, and you can't force it; but when it's right, it's really right.

Double Fine has mostly worked with larger publishers. How has working for yourselves differed from working with another publisher and financier?

It's made us become a lot more responsible. If one of these projects needs more time or money, that's now on us, so we've instilled a lot of new practices around milestone reviews. The good part is that we're now in control of those decisions, so if we want to invest our own money into making a project better (as we did with *Broken Age*) we don't have to convince anyone but ourselves.

***Given that Double Fine earned more money from Kickstarter than initially requested, what are some of the ways this affected the development of* Broken Age?**

Originally the game was intended to be a really small project, something on par with the scope of the Flash games on our website. It was more a subject for the documentary to follow than a big game of its own. When the project's funding so immediately skyrocketed, it was apparent that there was both a desire and a market for a big point-and-click adventure on the scale of the great Lucas Arts games of old. So we quickly adjusted the scope of the game and added a bunch more people to the team to really blow things out.

Double Fine also followed up on the Kickstarter by engaging with fans and backers more frequently. Did that dynamic influence how the project developed or how you viewed Double Fine's fan-base?

The documentary was an aspect of the Kickstarter that we were really excited about. There are a lot of people on the team who, like myself, didn't think there was a place for them in the game industry or similarly just didn't understand how it was that games were made. This provided us with a really great opportunity to do a bit of education on that.

2 Player Productions has done this and more by crafting a documentary series that offers an incredible look at all aspects of game development in a really entertaining package. We've been super-transparent and honest with our backers from the get-go, and they've been really appreciative of that peek behind the curtains.

But it's gone even beyond that. Through interactions in our forums and events like PAX, fan meet-ups, and Day of the Devs, we've grown really close to our community. We've provided them with a lot of detail on what we're doing, listened to their feedback, and used that to help shape our games. Ultimately, our fans are the ones we've been hoping to please all along, and this direct line of communication with them is only helping us meet that goal.

Overall, how would you describe* Broken Age's *emotional core?

Broken Age is a story about two young people growing up in situations that are beyond their control. It's about not following the crowd and instead learning to take charge of your own destiny. ❊

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